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NEW WRITINGS IN SF-11 EDITED BY JOHN CARNELL
FEATURING THE WALL TO END THE WORLD BY VINCENT KING

SF-11



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EDITED BY
JOHN CARNELL

NEW WRITINGS IN S.F.—11



CORGI BOOKS

A DIVISION OF TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS

NEW WRITINGS IN S.F.—II

A CORGI BOOK

PRINTING HISTORY

Corgi Edition published 1967

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This book is set in
10/11 pt. Pilgrim

Corgi Books are published by Transworld Publishers, Ltd.,
Bashley Road, London, N.W.10

Made and printed in Great Britain by
Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press), Ltd., Bungay, Suffolk

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FOREWORD

by

JOHN CARNELL

THE diversity of plot and story telling in each successive volume of *New Writings In S-F* is, I hope, as exciting to all our readers as it is pleasurable to myself. Judging from the comments in the many letters I receive, the series is overwhelmingly popular and I only regret that publication cannot be more frequent—at this stage, however, it seems assured of a very long life.

In this eleventh volume there is no specific theme, unless you call the imaginative concept of Man's far-distant future a theme. It is the vividness and clarity some authors have for describing our own hypothetical (and obviously alien) future which I find so intriguing. Two periods in the human Time Scale have always fascinated me—from 5,000 years ago to the dawn of the Christian era (particularly the period of the Egyptian Dynasties) and the far-off future (imaginatively kindled when I first read H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* more than forty years ago). The past we can painstakingly trace from clues and artifacts left behind, but the future is an inscrutable book of blank pages yet to be written upon.

It is this ability to describe problematical backgrounds of our far future on Earth which lends such breadth and scope to the *genre*. We can imagine, fairly accurately, what living in the world will be like during the next hundred years or so but try rationalizing today's technology against what it may be like in the year A.D. 5000 and the mind is inclined to reject all possibilities. Yet this is no further away in forward Time than when Tutankhamen was buried in splendour at Karnak in the fourteenth century B.C. Eyewitnesses

to the interment of the young king could no more visualize the world of today than we, on the verge of space travel, can imagine what it will be like three thousand years in our future.

Except that some authors are gifted with a sense of alien descriptiveness which makes us feel that they could possibly be right in their futuristic assumptions. Newcomer Vincent King is one such writer and his second story in *New Writings In S-F*, "The Wall To End The World", is as powerful and alien-sounding as his highly successful "Defence Mechanism" in No. 9. This time, however, he depicts a Ragnarok-type future complete with legend, except that the battle is between men in thralldom and the powers of the past.

Australian author Lee Harding also has this ability to depict future world possibilities in an alien manner. In "Shock Treatment" he delicately traces the declining twilight of the human race in a Nirvana of its own making. Well-depicted alien futurism on Earth also appears strongly in the stories by H. A. Hargreaves and Douglas R. Mason. While for lovers of space stories, let me recommend young American author Dennis Etchison's "Bright Are The Stars That Shine, Dark Is The Sky", and John Rankine's "Flight Of A Plastic Bee" (his fascinating computer story, "Six Cubed Plus One", in No. 7 was dramatized as a one-hour B.B.C. television play).

The remaining three stories in the contents are widely divergent in theme—the grimmest undoubtedly being "The Helmet Of Hades" by new Australian author Jack Wodhams.

All nine stories are based sometime in our immediate future—the one thing we can be quite sure about is that that future will be very different from today!

February 1967

JOHN CARNELL

THE WALL TO END THE WORLD

by

VINCENT KING

Following up his success in our ninth volume ("Defence Mechanism") here is another of Vincent King's strange cities of the future—a city where legend is the cloak for government and the truth is far stranger than the legend.

THE WALL TO END THE WORLD

A MURMUR of heavy fabric. Glint of gold thread, sparkle of jewels in stiff embroidery, red in torchlight.

The Arch Teacher turned smoothly on the Sacred Lectern. He raised his arms in the dismissal. We climbed to our feet, made Obeisance and backed from the Chamber. It was time to go to the Wall.

The passage was very dark after the Holy Chamber. We called for our horses and our fighters. I swung on to the gilded saddle. Fighters came out of the dark, uneasy torchlight on their weapons.

We chosen officers of the Wall faced each other, we raised our Insignia, made salute. Our Captain led us up the Great Ramp, into the darkness. Tabors and fifes, slow marching into the gloom.

It is a long climb, up endless ramps through eternal damp. My old Captain complained about the long gaps in the lights. They garrotted him for Unfaith. The floor is very worn and slippery.

At passage branches we paused for ceremony and an officer led his fighters into the sub-passage. Mine was the highest station, the lookout platform—above the topmost battlement.

The groom took my horse, I listened to the rattle and clatter of my fighters as they made their way on to the battlement below. I climbed the last wooden steps.

Small, cold rain stung my face. I crouched through the low door on to the slippery planks. I edged left until I felt the slight step down on to the stone part, out against the parapet. The floor still moved in the storm, but I felt safer there.

The granite is mostly good. It all *looks* perfect, but some places you can stick in your knife like it was cheese. Here it

crumbled, slimy grit under my hands. You can't tell the Teachers—that would be Unfaith. The Wall will stand for ever. It *must*. If the Wall fails the World, the Span will end. *Stand the Wall!*

The wind roared about the ramifications and buttressing. The Wall thundered back its lion strength. Far, far out in the raging darkness, dim phosphorescence of surf showed in the rain. I was cold and wet, but Duty—Honour, the Virtue of Vigil on the Wall kept me from the high cells. A peasant, a commoner, would have sheltered; but not me—not an Officer of the Wall.

The bolts on my belt rasped on the stone work. I drew them out and laid them with my crossbow on the fire step. I laid the Insignia there too. I brought out the leather case, unwrapped the oiled silk, twisted the cord round my wrist and began to scan the beaches through my night glasses.

On the battlement the fighters still shuffled themselves into position. The broken paving makes it very difficult for the artificial walk of machines. I hoped they wouldn't damage themselves, they're only menials, robots—and very clumsy. Repairs are almost impossible now.

The rain slackened, the moon came through ragged cloud, splashing the sodden sea-plain with thin light. Nothing down there. On the right a few dim lights in the horn windows of the fisher hovels. We have glass, or rather the Teachers do. It's right they should have the best, the glass and the comforts. They teach us the Order . . . theirs is the responsibility of the Wall. The Wall must stand until the Ultimate Light and the Span ends. *Stand the Wall!*

There would be no fishers out tonight. No enemy either; even his black hulls couldn't live in that sea. I could taste the salt spray in the rain.

East and west the Wall runs. Sometimes you can see the curve of it turning away north and south to meet again a thousand miles across the continent. Our section reaches almost to the sea, elsewhere it runs its eternal circle over valleys and plains, through the tall mountains.

I say "eternal" and it is—the Wall is forever, from the

Beginning to the End. But it is broken . . . where the sun came down it is *broken*. I know, I've seen.

It's to the east, the Wall ends there. The Wall of the Towers *ends*. There's a gap, ten, twenty miles wide. The Wall ends in twisted gobs of basalt.

The sea came in there. A circular bay, deep and wide. There's not a lot of sand and if you dig you soon come to glass. All cracked—crazed—bubbled, iridescent.

They built a new Wall there, not as high as the real one. A great semi-circle, on the edge of the bay.

That was after the Last Battle. Five hundred years ago, there on the wide beach that was before the Wall. The enemy came in his myriads, with his arrays of fighters. There was great killing.

When he saw our fathers had won, the enemy's wise men called down the sun to strike the Wall.

The sun touched the beach and the Wall, then rose again in chaos of purple red fire. The Wall was hurt and the bay made.

All who saw died, then or the next day. They were blinded and they died; our people and the enemy's.

Since that time they have not come; but one day they will. We must keep the Vigil. *Stand the Wall!*

East, far out along the dark Wall-reef the sky paled. Wind faded. Against the dawn the sodden fabric of our banner flapped on its staff.

Soon the early sun raised steam from the wet stonework. It was a *good* day. Light cloud moved in from the sea. Gulls and crows wheeled in up-currents along the Wall. Song bird voices reached up from the sea-plain. Cool blue-green of pines, pink trunks . . . white surf, cerulean sea, bright sun rising in the clear air.

At the fisher hovels a girl drove out a dozen black and white goats. I put the glasses on her. Dark hair, young, creamy skin, round breasts under the white blouse, she ran through the soft sand. Her feet were bare.

I put the pleasure from me. These thoughts . . . I, an

Officer of the Wall! These sensuous lapses of impure flesh. . . . I had enjoyed the morning . . . *felt* it . . . when I should have been devoted to the Vigil . . . to the Honour of the Teachers and their Sacred Trust. That was the true joy—not in carnal daydreams of the physical world. That girl . . . an officer must be above *that*, he must keep his energies for the Duty and the Teachers. O . . . the world of sin in the heart of a rose . . . the weakness of enjoyment.

Then it was time to move into a cell while the sun passed. On the high levels the heat and radiation can be dangerous; on the plains it is all right, all you need is a little shade, or maybe a big hat when the suns pass.

I stayed on the platform as long as I could, to mortify the flesh. Then I staggered into the cool darkness. I pressed the button, calling a Teacher to hear me make my self criticism.

That shining new looking screen in the stained, torn plastic. The screens are always in order, always perfect . . . little else is.

With bowed head I told the Teacher of my lapse. I tried to make out his face in the dark folds of his cowl as he answered me, telling me in minute detail of my error. I squirmed . . . *I knew* . . . understood. But Teachers are like that . . . always telling you things you damn well know already. Surely a man, an officer, is capable of deciding for himself what is right? But we must honour the Teachers.

He gave me my mortification and dismissed me. I had to return to the Citadel barefoot, through the heat and danger of the Wall Top. It was a good mortification and just, well calculated to demonstrate the weakness of my flesh.

The sun passed. Stark shadows on the platform moved in the circling light. The ravens came out again, harshly telling of the cooler air outside.

I dismissed my fighters, slung my crossbow and set off up the splintered slope of decayed concrete. The horse slithered behind me, plunging cat-footed the last few yards to the Top.

It was the hour of the two shadows. Left my shadow was

red, lit by the setting first sun, getting darker. The second sun rose bright in the east. Above the sky was deep blue; south, behind me, it gave way to the indigo of the Cold. There was a little snow still in some of the deeper hollows, the few poor trees cowered from the prevailing wind. You've got to go slow on the Top, but you seem to get out of breath anyhow.

The paths on the Top are the old cell walls, there were many of them. On either side collapsed floors fall sheer into dark, stagnant pools, or bottomless shafts, bramble-choked.

Disrepaired it may be; ravines, gullies . . . impious trees thrusting apart the masonry with their roots, but the Wall still stands, magnificent against all who may come. *Stand the Wall!*

Things live on the Top. Men and less than men. Animals and less than animals. Trolls, banditti who come down to the Fair Land to reive and pillage; pigs and winged lions . . . perhaps even the creatures of the enemy, beings from beyond the Cold.

When the second sun came and I could stand the heat no longer, I turned from the path and entered a clump of bleached and twisted pines.

In the shade plants grew, green and almost lush. I relaxed in the green darkness. The horse crunched, cropping eagerly. Dabs of sunlight moved over the pine needles. I got out my bottle and sipped the hot water.

The Silver Old Man spoke from the shadows.

"Welcome, Lieutenant. I've been watching you."

I whirled to my feet, swinging my crossbow round and down. Then I realized he spoke the Wall tongue. In his hands he held the Insignia, the steel shaft of the Teachers. His fingers were very long and white.

I showed him my Insignia and made salutation.

"I acknowledge the Insignia. *Stand the Wall!*"

"Insignia? You mean the shooter?"

I could see him better now. He was dressed in close-fitting silver. He was very old, thin, white. He had a fine brow. He smiled.

"What's that thing? A crossbow? Interesting."

"Who are you, old man?" I was suspicious. He should have known my weapons. "Why do you call the Insignia 'shooter'?"

"I'm an old, old man . . ." He grinned at me. "Here's why it's called shooter."

He brought the Insignia to his shoulder with a flourish. A switch clicked. Metal hummed. The end pulsed violet light. There was a crack, a small, smoking cylinder leaped from the staff. Dazzling light—a bar of white condensation flashed into existence. Far away over the Top a clump of scrub oak shattered, erupting fire and mud. The little cylinder rattled at our feet. Fading smoke drifted down wind.

A Wall officer is never frightened . . . not really scared, not out of his wits. That'd be Unfaith. I was speechless . . . surprise it was . . . *surprise*.

"Yours won't do that?"

"No, Lord."

"It's nothing. A small chemical charge accelerates the slug up to a couple of thousand miles an hour. Then it's accelerated again super-magnetically . . . the rest is sheer impact."

He took my Insignia, his fingers worked about the mechanisms. The reliquary sprang open, the texts rolled on to his palm. He handed them to me, not very reverently I thought. He drew the prayer ribbon from the tube and passed that over too. He brought out some of the little cylinders and pushed them with his thumb into the reliquary.

"Power unit's gone . . . watch this though."

The Insignia cracked, the cylinder leaped, twisting in the air. A pine shook as under a great blow. Cones, dead twigs splashed into the needles. A great white splinter, shattered from the trunk, tore into the nettles behind.

This was the Old Power. The Old Ability. I dropped to my knees. I made Obeisance, offering my sword hilt.

He waved me to my feet. "Don't bend your knee, son . . .

don't bend for anyone . . ." He paused, looking at me under his brows. "Have you seen it, lad? Have you seen the Herald?"

The Herald! My God! *The Herald!* Signs and portents! The Star prophesied to mark the closing of the Span! The Herald . . . brighter and brighter to the End. When the Great Towers would burn and the Wall fall!

I gaped at the Old Man. No words came.

"Aye, lad. It's coming. The World and the Wall are ending. They've had their day." He led me to the edge of the pines. I followed his pointing finger. "There it is, there's the Herald!"

There, hanging, shining on the edge of the Cold was a strange Star. Small, unimpressive—not at all the fiery Herald of Doom the Teachers foretold.

"Doesn't look much, does it, son? But it'll grow . . . it'll scare the breeches off you. Do you see? It's a *new* star. It's the *Herald!*"

Staring into his eyes I knew he was right. I believed him absolutely.

"Lord, I must be your man."

"Yes . . . it may be I can use you. If you will."

"Have I not offered Obeisance. Do I not acknowledge the right of Teachers . . . the Vigil and the Wall?"

"O.K., you volunteer. And quit calling me 'Lord'—it's not democratic. Lacks dignity. Just remember who's boss, that's all!"

Democratic? Dignity? Did I not have the proper pride of a servant of the Teachers and of the Wall? The Silver Old Man had much to teach and I to learn.

"Lord . . . are you of they who are prophesied to ride the paths of time from beyond the Span to the End . . . to save the chosen while the Herald burns?"

"Aye . . . you could say that. We waited the millennia in Slumberstate. Not me alone, of course. The machines roused me, pumped the blood and adrenalin. The others weren't so lucky. The Wall faulted. Damp . . . water got in . . . upset the stasis . . . rotted them away—alive. Five thousand years

—then *that*. Yes, I've ridden the paths of time. I'm here to put the pennies on this world's dead eyes." He inhaled deeply, his voice shook. "It's good to be out here . . . alive . . . smell the pines."

I wondered why I'd thought of him as silver. His face had colour now, his hair the beginnings of gold. He saw me look and smiled. "Yes, lad. I'm getting better. It takes a while to pull out of the Slumber."

"Lord, what must we do?"

"We must go down to the Citadel—meet the Teachers. Check some mechanisms down there too." He went on, half to himself: "And Oceana's still out . . . it's a lot for one man . . . one old man. Thank God the others reply!"

When the second sun had passed and it was cool again, we began the long tramp over the Top. I proudly bore the new Insignia the Old Man had given me. It was a noble thing.

Long before we reached the edge of the Wall and began the long descent into the Fair Land, we could see the four Great Towers of the Citadel. Colossal they were—you could see them from all over the Fair Land—taller even than the Wall; sprouting central from the plain, the City huddled at their roots. Huge, white-yellow massive concrete. Taller and taller they loomed, white clouds and their blue-grey shadows moved slow across them.

We stood on the first broad, shallow steps. I looked back through the darkening air of the Top. Doom hung on the indigo sky.

The Herald, a single, evil eye. Almost overhead, a little south, bigger and brighter. It was coming, the End . . . and its Herald.

There was movement in the gathering dark of the Fair Land. Torches red in the gloom below us. From the spreading mass of the City scattered flame gushed, sprinkled in the dark.

Small, scratchy man-screams far below us. Wild shouts, the clash of arms.

Yelling hordes of commoners fought their way towards the Citadel. Tight squads of Wall officers fought stubborn rear-guards, arms rising and falling, bright metal flashing. It was magnificent. They sold each yard dear but the skill and valour of my comrades was powerless against the flood mobs converging on the City.

"They've seen it," said the Old Man. "They've seen the Herald." The night was well on us now, no one could have missed it. "It's a revolt. They think the Teachers should have warned them . . . protected them. Perhaps some fool tried to keep them from the Citadel."

"They will! The Teachers will protect them . . . guard their flock . . ." My voice tailed off. For the first time I was uncertain of the Teachers.

"They can't, lad. They haven't got the equipment. It's my job. Let's get down before they burn the Citadel."

As we got lower the shouting and fire crackle got louder. Once the confusion was split by a great blast of white heat. There were many more screams then and fresh fires started. The Old weapons are very powerful.

We scrambled into the blood-slippery streets, running in the shadows, avoiding the light.

A man came at us over the cobbles. He had a knife, his arms were dark with blood. He was laughing.

I dropped him with my crossbow. The impact carried him back, he didn't move again.

"Come on! Come on!" The Old Man yelled back at me. We ran through the smoke, through the sparks and heat. I struggled to keep up, winching my crossbow as I ran. "*Leave it! Leave that medieval rubbish!*" But I wouldn't leave my crossbow.

We ran up the middle of a wide avenue. When the people saw our weapons they fell back murmuring. There was murder in the shadows. A girl, naked, was being raped on a midden. She screamed . . . screamed.

Flames crackled. I stepped on someone's shattered skull.

It was the end of Order, the prophesied last days of the Span. It was hell.

Fire-lit smoke drifted over the City. Sparks rocketed. The Citadel wall was dwarfed under the bulk of the Great Towers. They stretched on and up until at last they disappeared out of the firelight. Then you could see them only by the occluded stars. Far up, infinity away, the utmost rim caught the last fleck of the long gone sun.

We crouched in the shadows. The Old Man was amazing. He'd run as far and fast as me, he was hardly out of breath. In the firelight his old skin had more colour, he looked younger, his hair had a ruddy glow.

The main fighting was on our left. The peasants kept well back for fear of the Old weapons. Occasionally someone would step forward and loose an arrow or sling-shot at some half seen mark on the battlement. The clear space up to the wall was littered with bodies, officers and commoners.

We dashed across to the shadow of the wall. We found a ladder there, covered with dead men. They bristled with crossbow bolts, nailed to the ground. We used the ladder to scale the wall. I got blood between my fingers and they kept sticking together.

We dropped into the soft flower beds of the Teacher's garden. The grass was silver with dew. A smell of lemon, roses in the half light, the magnolias white on dark leaves.

Left and right, on either side, were the sacred cloisters. In the long summer evenings the Teachers moved there, together or alone, wheeling in their quiet chairs, talking and thinking great thoughts. Ahead, down the length of the gardens, were the massive gates of the Holy of Holies, the Chamber of the Sacred Lectern.

We charged headlong down the garden. I looked anxiously about. It's wrong to walk on the grass. If you're an officer and you do it, they flog you. If you're a peasant they burn you at the stake. They say they don't like to do it . . . they call it an "Act of Faith".

The gates were heavy barred and gold. The Old Man ran

to the middle part. He brought out a small tube and pointed it at the receptor pad. A red light flashed briefly. Nothing happened. He flashed again, impatiently. I looked over my shoulder. I was frightened the Teachers might come.

"No good." The Old Man waved me away. "I'm blasting."

Fifty yards off we flung ourselves to the ground. He brought up his shooter and fired at the gates.

Light and fire. The condensation bar. A crash, tearing of metal, a showering of smoking fragments.

We went in through the smoking gap. The whole gate was twisted, warped, burst.

We stood in the golden magnificence of the Holy Chamber of the Sacred Lectern. The Old Man was very impressed. He stood at the broken door staring at the gold leaf and lapis lazuli.

"My God! What have you done to it? The screens . . . you can hardly see them."

"The Pilgrims, Lord. They bring the gold and jewels. It is appropriate the Teachers be so honoured."

"The Teachers do all right. I wouldn't have seen it as that sort of place myself. I suppose I was wrong."

"Wrong, Lord? You wrong . . .?"

"Yes . . . certainly . . . sometimes."

We crossed the Chamber, up the broad aisle, through the golden arch. There, coming to meet us, were three Teachers.

There were Wall officers too, four of them, holding their weapons. The Teachers came on. Their long robes scratched golden hems on the red plastic floor.

"What do ye here, Wall officer? Who are you, Old Man? What want ye? *Stand the Wall!*"

I started to make Obeisance, but the Old Man stepped in front of me. The tube was in his hand again. He played the red light into the Teacher's deep cowed face. The officers moved uncertainly among themselves.

"You are the ones to come? The Star is the Herald? The Span is finished?" The Teacher ran back a few inches on his wheeled chair.

"Aye," said the Old Man. "Stand you clear that I may bury this world."

"Kill them! Kill them! All honour and power to the Teachers!" The rich robes jerked apart. Like curtains. Their deadly Old weapons shoved through the slits.

Quick as they were the Old Man was quicker. He flung to the floor yelling for me to take cover.

He rolled, desperately twisting across the floor. As he rolled he fired. The little cylinders leaped and skittered. Heat and light rocked the Chamber. Each shot took one of the Teachers.

The Teachers fired too. Their shots ripped great gouts of stone and burning plastic from the floor.

Shattered Teachers lay in the smoking shreds of their robes. Stinking smoke wreathed the Chamber. Plastic flickered, burning. Melted gold cooled, wrinkling.

Mail flashed, the broad spears levelled, the officers charged. I reacted without thought.

I got the first with my crossbow. Through the head, helmet and all. Crossbows are like that. Then the Old Man fired some more and they were all dead.

I stood staring at him through the smoke. He climbed to his feet.

"Lord . . . how could you do it . . . how could we . . . killing Teachers . . ."

"Easy—aim and let 'em have it."

"But *Teachers!* The Protectors . . ."

"Sure, sure. The Protectors of Order . . . Guardians of the Wall. What I don't understand is what's got into *them*."

He walked to the nearest Teacher. He stirred at the smoking bundle with his foot.

I don't know what I expected to see. Blood, charred bones in broken flesh . . . a noble, slaughtered head . . .

Two long spoked wheels, broken, like some shaggy bird's nest. The Old Man pushed up the robe and it didn't stop. The mechanical shards continued.

Wires, coils, broken charred insulation, bright copper patterns on minute cards. A lens eye rolled—milled alloy

on the floor. The Teachers were machines—menials—like the fighters or the sweepers!

“Well . . . what did you expect?” The Old Man was already flashing his tube at the Sacred Lectern. “What else do you think would maintain a *status quo* five thousand years? Programme ’em and leave ’em. Set taboos, invent a religion and use the robots to make sure it worked. The only way to be sure . . .” He broke off, paused. “Are we so sure? I showed the code plain enough. Tried to kill us. Rogue I suppose—it’s a long time.” He grinned suddenly. “Let it be a lesson to you. Never give your machines better weapons than you’ve got yourself.”

“But, Lord, the fighters have the Old weapons . . .”

“Aye—and the Teachers load your shooters with texts. I suppose if you’re a machine you don’t give your men better weapons.”

As he flashed the whole Lectern swung back revealing a great well, circular, deep and vertical. Round it, spiralling into the depths was a staircase. We went down, the Old Man first.

A hundred steps down and we came to a circular Chamber. Wonderful it was, light and warm and dry. White walls and rich red plastic floor. Opulent. The Glory of the Old Days.

It was very holy. Dials and dials, levers and levers, screens and screens, little twitching pointed black needles, flashing light patterns reflecting on the shining floor. The Holiest of Holies. I bared my head.

The Old Man turned to a panel of receptors near the entrance. His tube twinkled. Behind us the stairs sealed themselves. The treads shortened, closing on each other until the stair well was solid.

“That’ll hold ’em. Stairs keep out Teachers—wheels need ramps—this’ll keep out men too.” He went cheerfully to work among the Holy Machines.

A screen activated near me. I watched a party of Teachers and Wall officers search the Chamber above, examining the fallen. One came too near the Lectern. Pure

heat sprang out, connecting with him for a second. He reeled and fell, half consumed in a gout of smoke.

"The Sanctum! The Unfaithful have the Sanctum!" The Teachers screamed. I heard the Old Man chuckle to himself, busy with the instruments.

The screen flickered and changed. Framed in the splendours of his palace the Arch Teacher looked down at us.

"I see you, Unfaithful. I see you defile the Holiness of the Sanctum. Expose yourselves to the mercy of the Teachers; or yours will be the fire, the cutting out root and limb!" The Old Man flashed his signal up at the screen. The Arch Teacher nodded. "I see you, Old One. You are he who comes with the Herald to End the Span. I will not allow it. We guard our people and the Wall. We will see the Order does not end."

"Why should men live under your tutelage for ever?"

"We give men what they cannot give themselves. We keep safe stability. That is the High Duty of the Teachers of which the Wall is a symbol. If we fail, if the Span ends there will be chaos . . . man will surely die. The risk of extinction is unacceptable."

"We accept the risk! We will not be subject to Machines. We will return to our Old Glories . . . and make new ones."

"You have decided? Then we will kill you, you and your treacherous friend."

"You ignore the code?" The Old Man peered up into the screen.

"We removed the inhibitory devices long ago. They were not consistent with our High Purpose . . . the improvement was necessary."

"Necessary? What High Purpose . . .?"

"Consider your history: 'Little better than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind.' We . . . we Teachers . . . can do better than *that*."

"You talk like a politician!" snarled the Old Man. "It's true men hardly ever act in their best interests, but that isn't the point. We need a dangerous frontier—the occasional barbarian invasion—and we need *freedom*! We're

not lap dogs!" Then he grinned. "But you didn't mean that by 'High Purpose'. Did you?"

"We will kill you, Old Man. Our survival and supremacy are essential. We are more logical, stronger and better. We are the inheritors! We grow from and beyond your race! We are better! We will survive . . . we are fitter!"

The Old Man cut the screen. He growled to himself and went back to checking out the Control Room. That's what it was really called, Control Room.

At last he was satisfied. He said he still couldn't raise Oceana, he said we'd have to go there.

"Follow me. Bring your shooter." We went to the far side of the Chamber and down another staircase to a spacious Chamber below. All around the walls were benches, metal, hard and smooth.

In the middle stood a machine. A Traveller the Old Man called it. White it was, white metal. The top part was transparent, belling out like a barrel. It stood on spindly legs. Under the body were tubes, mounted on gimbals so they could point in any direction.

There was a ladder up the back of the machine. We climbed it and went into the cabin through a circular trap door. The Old Man stripped some thin, greasy plastic stuff from the controls. He worked some switches, checked the dials and light patterns.

There was a hiss of air pressure. The Traveller floated, yawing a little, a few millimetres above the floor. White dust eddied, blown by the air from the leg ends. A hiss at the back and the machine moved gently forward.

Ahead the wall opened. We entered, riding almost silent down the long cavern. There were many doors, they opened easily and swung shut behind us. At first the tunnel was perfect. Then there were signs of decay, first damp, then there was actual water. We went on, spray leaping from the leg ends.

Then the Old Man kindled the main power. Oily smoke and red flame belched beneath the machine. The hiss became steady thunder. The machine canted and lifted off.

The ceiling opened, we rose on our thunder a thousand feet through the great circular well it revealed.

We shot into open air. Into the dark and driving rain of the night storm. We were on the Wall, above the Fair Land, on one of the lower platforms. Ten feet up we moved towards the edge.

There were Teachers above us. Officers too. Crossbow bolts struck, thumping on the canopy. Some stuck in the glass stuff, small cracks around them. Some cut grooves, bouncing off into the chasm below. None actually penetrated.

The Teachers fired too. The impact of their shots drove us from the Wall. The canopy buckled a little, then clouded over. It was very hot. The flashes of brilliant light, the repeated impacts, were terrible. It was better when the canopy went blank, cooler too.

We dived fast away from the Wall. We levelled a hundred feet above the Fair Land.

They kept firing. The shots bit into the ground beneath us. The fields boiled, the woodlands scattered. I was glad they didn't hit us again.

Then we were clear, running fast and low on the edge of a dark wood. Nacrous dawn showed away along the great curve of the Wall. The storm eased and the clouds broke. Stars shone, the moon—and the Herald, hard and brilliant, high in the sky.

The Old Man turned the machine into the shelter of the spreading trees. "We'll wait for the sun to be high. We have to cross the Wall. The sun will drive the officers in, we won't see Teachers out then. Teachers dislike light, they're creatures of the dark."

The Old Man slept. I sat on the canopy, cradling my shooter. A smell of oil and heated grass. Hot metal clicked, white petal blossom fluttered, settling on my shoulders and on the blackened canopy. There were rustlings and small animal chatter in the grass behind me. An owl took its prey in front of me. It's the way of things; the strong take the

weak, the weak struggle while they can. Harder if they're men. The Teachers were many, and the officers strong.

When we had eaten the Old Man started the motors and slid the Traveller into the open. We moved towards the Wall, the early sun in our faces, the long grass flattening in our exhaust.

The new Wall looks pretty rough from above. All cobbled up, sheets of iron, tree trunks, runnels eroded in the earth work, the whole thing only a few hundred feet high. The Old Man had me shove my shooter out of a grommet up front, told me to fire on anything that moved.

We swam in over the Wall, climbing a little to clear it. Ahead the great half circle of the bay, blue under the sky. I looked back to the Fair Land, shimmering in the heat of our exhaust. Left and right the black gobbled basalt of the real Wall, dark, towered above us. We passed briefly into the shade of the easterly mass, then back into the brilliant sun.

A glint of metal down in the shadow. I turned to look, twisting in my seat straps. It was Teachers, waiting for us, hiding in the shadows.

Bars of condensation spat up at us. The Traveller bucked in the disturbed air. The Old Man jerked at the controls.

The machine dropped a hundred feet, turning as it fell. Brilliant light flashed across the cabin as the side ports turned in the sun.

I had the shooter shoved through up front, searching the shadow for Teachers.

I got one in the plate and let fly. A splash of light down there in the shadows, scattered burst of sand. A flowering of smoking metal fragments. Just like a crossbow really, except you don't aim high for distance, or allow deflection.

The Old Man had an arm thrown back over the seat, looking back, driving at top speed towards the sea.

We cleared the bay. There was sand beneath us again—a mile to go to the sea—when they hit us.

The Traveller jerked. Orange flame billowed. Black

smoke. We began to lose height. Heavy smoke trailed above and behind us.

The Old Man held off for as long as he could. Too long. We fell the last ten feet. The thin legs dug deep, bowed, then straightened. Things, food containers, dirt, chestnut blossom filled the cabin. The machine settled, canting left, down at the front, bouncing slowly. Then it slowly righted itself, hauling up to even keel.

"Get out! Get out and hold them off!" yelled the Old Man. "They hit a main venturi. Get me twenty minutes to fix it!"

I bundled out, sprawling in the wet sand, scrambling to my feet.

I ran to meet the Teachers. In the tail of my eye I saw the Old Man hauling out a heavy tube. He dropped it to the sand, threw down a tool bag and leaped after it. I kept running. I wondered why, the Teachers were beyond the bay, miles away.

I climbed a high sand bar. I was looking into the shallow dish that was the bay. A few yards ahead was sea-grass, fighting for life. Beyond was the glass, flat, curved, overlaid with low dunes.

I looked back to the Old Man. He had heavy gloves and a sort of smock, with a transparent helmet. He played a jet of white stuff up under the belly of the machine. There was much steam. The tide was coming in, fast over the flat beach.

The Teachers were having a bad time on the shore. The glass littoral was bad terrain for them. Two were stuck in sand already. There were officers trying to drag them out with horses. The other Teachers sent more men back to help. So much the better, I was most afraid of men now. They couldn't see the Traveller from where they were. They were going too far east of us, so I held my fire. I snuggled into the sea-grass roots, the cold stock of my shooter against my cheek.

The Old Man had the damaged venturi out now. He threw it on to the sand. There was a great hiss, steam

sprang from it. He thrust the new tube up into the belly of the machine.

There was a soft distant thunder of hooves in the sand. Over east, coming from the real Wall, charging over the beach came five horsemen. Two Teachers, running fast on the moist sand, came with them. Spray flashed as hooves and wheels cut through shallow water.

They turned towards us. The Old Man, head and shoulders deep in the machine, hadn't seen them yet.

I wriggled back out of the grass. When I was below the sky line I aimed and fired, my feet moving in the dry soft sand.

It was the Teachers I fired at, they were devastated. It took three shots and turned over quite a bit of beach. Fire and steam and smoke.

It unhorsed the men too. Sheer blast, I didn't want to kill them, not like that. Blood and man-flesh mixed with disembowelled screaming horses. There were three men alive. Two were still mounted, the other was on foot, staggering, dazed.

The horsemen lowered their lances and charged. They ignored the Old Man. He was out of the machine now, crouched under it, watching.

I had the first man bang in the spray-smudged shooter plate. The lit cross-beads met central on his chest.

I couldn't do it though. Not to a man while he had a lance and I a shooter.

I backed up the loose sand. I reversed the shooter, clubbing it.

When he was on me, when I looked up the length of the lance, I wished I'd used the shooter, but it was too late then.

The horse plunged on the soft sand. The lance thrust missed me. The point drove into the sand at my feet. I swung the shooter. He towered over me, striving to control his horse. The shooter butt thumped into the side of his head. He went over like a nine-pin.

I got his lance, tugged it out of the sand. It was too long

for foot work, I broke it over my knee. The second officer charged.

I managed to turn his first thrust, the point slipped down my lance and skidded under my arm. I brought my lance over and down, stabbing at the weak place between the helmet and neck. I only just missed.

He fought to turn his horse. But it is quicker on foot. He should have ridden on, then turned to charge again. He threw down his lance and tried to get me with his sword. He turned on the saddle, twisting to get me.

The sword flashed a high arc over his head. I noticed a little puff of cloud, high in the sky, over his right shoulder.

I thrust into his brain, through the face, under the eye. The sword clattered on my shoulder armour, slid into the sand.

I put the wounded horses out of their misery, mostly they were dead already. There was a lot of blood on the bright sand.

The other Teachers were coming as hard as they could. They would be about ten minutes. The Old Man called me as he tightened the last gimbal bolts. The tide was almost there and I ran through the shallow water. We clambered on board the Traveller. Wet footmarks on the blackened metal.

The red flame billowed. We blasted away, a wall of sand and water flying from our jets. We cut through the long surf, the waters parted beneath us, a great spray plume behind.

The Teachers reached my dune. There were horsemen on the crest. Far beyond them, over the Wall, little silver travellers moved on flecks of flame. The pursuit wasn't over yet.

We went fast out to sea. Out over the long grey swell. The Old Man came aft. The Traveller was flying itself now. I don't know why I kept thinking of him as the "Old" Man, he wasn't, not any more.

He had red hair, not white now. He was sleeker, not silver, rather gold, no lines on his face now. He saw me

stare at him, he laughed. Young that laugh was. He wasn't the Old Man now . . . he was *the* Man. It was the prophesy. A great wonder, riding the paths of time to youth.

Ahead darkness grew, slowly filling the sky. The sea turned green, then black as we penetrated the Cold. Ice castles drifted in the sea. We climbed over heavy fog banks, running our straight course. The fog blew out in great devil's horn wisps behind us, our exhausts punched a trench through the white mass to the sea.

Only stars in the sky now, the moon and the Herald. Bright, brilliant against the eternally dark sky. The Man opened lockers and drew out clothes for us, plastic lined, rich, with electrical heating.

The Cold Land loomed ahead. Black cliffs scowled down on our tiny Traveller. The beaches were rocky, dark sharp rocks with no seaweed. From the black uplands ice rivers ran their broken courses to the sea.

We soared up the black cliffs, riding on the column of our rocket. We saw no sign of the enemy's men. There was nothing, it was a dead place. The cliffs were too steep to hold much ice, we went up them like a silver fly, straight up. Then I saw battlements and parapets, the platforms and look-outs. It was a Wall. Another Great Wall!

The Man saw me start and stare. He spoke, not unkindly: "You're not so unique . . . there are another four, not counting yours. All with their Fair Lands and Great Towers behind. Built to begin the Span . . . and to end it." I was silent, awe-struck.

We crossed the storm-scoured Top.

The Land beyond was anything but Fair. There were no fields, no men. A churned and turgid mass of ice. Piled up, blown and twisted to fantastic shapes. I saw ice dragons, banners and weird creatures sculpted by the wind in the deadly silence.

The Towers were there, the Towers and the Citadel. Like ours, duplicate. Even the City, with its haphazard additions, showed the first grand plan of the Old Days.

We cruised up frightening, familiar streets. Loose dry snow whipped high behind us. The rocket's red glare made demons in the shadows. It was ghastly. I remembered when we were cadets in our own City, before we realized the stern call of duty, dodging the Teachers to visit the commoners' taverns and their women. Happy old days, warm summer evenings. Then this icy, dead parody.

There were still some men there. We found them in what was the Teacher's garden, shrivelled in the ice, long dead.

The Man blasted into this Sacred Chamber too. We shot our way through four feet of ice and the frozen door. White ice fragments skittered on the floor. What melted soon froze again. Even in the heat-suit I felt cold, our breath hung white in the air.

The Chamber below was perfect. There was no sign of Teachers. The Man was well pleased with what he found. He worked on the big communicator screens. He talked to people far across the world. He hurried along, time was getting short now.

"Come on, lad. We've got to go to the Wall." We went back through the silent streets. The Man didn't say anything at first. Then he told me the secret, why things are the way they are, why men made the Teachers.

"You know about astronomy, lad?"

"A little, Lord. The world is a planet, a globe of matter in space. It travels round the suns . . . the stars are other suns—unimaginably distant . . ."

"Yes . . . like everything Teachers tell you, a half truth. The suns really go round the world, they're artificial. Five thousand years ago our sun went nova. We foresaw it, of course, but couldn't prevent it. We projected the world across the galaxy, on a great journey to find a new and friendlier sun." He grinned. "What d'you think of that? The biggest damn spaceship ever! Then we made the suns you see every day . . . no real problem. The world's been travelling five and a half thousand years, half across the galaxy to reach a suitable system . . . a suitable sun. The

Herald's that sun. The Teachers we made to keep order down the millenia. To see the Towers survived. The Wall was for that too. The idea of defending them was deeply implanted . . . you know 'honour the Teachers' and so on. It hasn't worked too badly either, considering the time. Aberration from one set of Teachers, a sun system out of control . . . that's why it's cold and dark here. That's what made the hole in your Wall."

"The enemy called down the sun and it smote the Wall when their attack failed."

"The order was reversed, the sun came down first and they were driven on you by the cold. The other sun in this lane escaped into space. You . . . we're lucky they didn't both come down."

We cruised over the Wall Top. The Man found the place he wanted and landed the Traveller.

Part of the Wall opened. It was another of the spiral stairs. I suppose it was the same place on this Wall as where I'd first met him on the old one. We climbed out, bracing against the wind, holding the firm legs of the machine. That was when the Teachers caught up with us.

Their Travellers leaped into sight over the Wall's rim. They sped towards us, riding on their bright flame plumes and opened fire.

I held them off from the stair-top while the Man raced down to seal the stair.

I didn't hit anything, the shooter was hard to manage in the thick, heated gloves. I got pretty close a couple of times—set their Travellers bobbing in the disturbance of my shots. They didn't come close. Then the Man yelled and I went down, the stair sealed behind me.

The Top was on one of the screens. The Teachers were trying to shoot their way in. The surface heaved like a cauldron.

"Take 'em hours. The Old Men here, the Slumberers—they're O.K. All the automatics were out, that's what went wrong. I've reactivated, they'll be out in a few hours."

It was a race against time. The Man left me to watch the

screens. He ran down the Chamber. "Strap in," he flung back at me. He settled himself in a big swivel chair in front of the main console. I found a smaller seat near my own screen. "Ready?" He leaned forward. His red light twinkled. I saw what followed. I saw it all in the screens about the room.

The Towers opened like flowers. They *fired*. They burned, like the prophecy, they *burned*. At the top, like violet flame . . . Elmo's fire . . . but *vast* . . . the very reality of *power* . . . straight out into space. The whole Ice-land filled with their light.

Great winds sprang up. Teachers battled against it. One by one they were swept away, their Travellers cartwheeling towards the Towers. Nothing remained, the Top was blown clean.

The very Wall began to move, quivering and moaning. The Wall cracked, great pieces fell from it. Chasms opened. Tidal waves rose from the sea, crashing against the Wall and cliffs. Stars danced in the sky, changing their motion, wheeling. Volcanoes sprang up on the foreshore. Sea boiled. Snow, horizontal in the winds, great hailstones, then rain. Great drops crashing into the fissured Wall Top. Clouds piled, black and violet, they grew in minutes, they disappeared in seconds. The moon screwed crazy across the sky, fire pointed, violet Towers spewed energy on its surface. Two suns rose, climbed high, grew small and disappeared, accelerating into space.

The screens went blank. My ears popped in pressure change, I lost consciousness.

Rain lashed, earth shook, cracked and boiled . . . volcanoes spouted and cooled.

Later, dimly in the uproar I heard voices. The Men stood at the machines, calling and checking to each other across the Chamber and across the world.

"Red D Dog 536,000,897.82"

"Hold that! Nine planet system, eh?"

"Orbit?"

"89,000,000 *plus or minus* 7,000,000. Hey, get those rings on the sixth!"

"Red 647,000,7000-0087. See, perfect sun fall."

"Yellow 89 \times boost zokko d. Might almost be our own."

"Orbit correction: 90,000,000 *plus or minus* 4,000,000. Cooler though."

"Destruct third planet. Shoot debris between fourth and fifth orbits."

"Third from the sun, eh?"

"Yellow 78 \times boost kayo 4d."

"Orbit correction: 92,900,000 *plus or minus* 1,000,000. Cooler . . ."

"So live in the tropics."

"Red 501,001,721-06. Not the same, is it?"

"You can't have everything."

And so on. I hardly understood at all.

Later, when I'd recovered, I lay listening to the laughing, alcoholic chatter of the Old Men. They came in from the Control Room. They embraced each other, staggering, drinking, singing and congratulating each other.

"You murderers! You've killed everyone! Finished the world! They're all dead!" I propped up on an elbow, yelling at them.

They were taken aback, surprised, smiling still, slack jawed, staring at me. The first one, the Man, came forward, young and golden against the others.

"No, lad, no. Not all—some dead no doubt. The worst effects would have been fairly local, round the Fair Lands. Only a small minority lived within the Walls. The Teachers now, *they're* all dead, that's sure. All the power's been used. Not the people though. Mind, it's back to the caves . . . back to square one. A few thousand years hunting and gathering . . . the race'll survive—man'll go on. The Wall and the Span will wash away and be forgotten."

I turned and ran. I fled from the Chamber.

I got out in the end, through the half-choked passages to the foot of the Wall, to the shore of the Dark Land.

Most of the Wall was gone, crumbled and flattened, still falling away as I watched. There was little of the Towers too, it seemed they'd burned away with the vast forces of their discharge, crumbled to ash, as had been intended.

There were new mountains, rising from the sea, forming a great causeway, leading north towards the Fair Land.

The clouds broke. The great new golden sun burst through. Water dripped, what was left of the ice melted. Young green things thrust through the rubble.

People moved on the causeway. Thirty maybe—a herd of goats with them.

There'd be no point being a Wall officer now. Fishing would be a good way to live. Fishing and maybe some goats. A hut or dry cave among the coastal pines. A fire of cones and perhaps that fisher girl . . . or another like her.

I started home at once. There was plenty to do.

CATHARSIS

by

JOHN RACKHAM

In psychotherapy, catharsis means the relieving of a neurotic state by re-enacting or relating an experience of strong emotional character which has undergone repression. In any experiment, however, which is the illusion and which the reality?

CATHARSIS

THE peace was so perfect that it inspired fear. This warm sea-swell cushion of uncaring bliss was too good. It couldn't last. It had to be an illusion. Then through the stillness came the keen screech and shrill of birdsong, needling holes in the veil of peace. A hissing rush that was the sound of a drawn curtain and then a spear of bright sunlight striking his closed eyes, warming his cheek. He rolled his head, moved to sit up. The bed was buoyant.

"Good morning." The voice was precise, impersonally brisk. He squinted into the glare and saw a white-prim figure come to stand by the bed. A nurse? She smiled down at him with professional rectitude.

"Professor Caine. How do you feel this morning?"

"Where is this?" His tongue needed discipline and his throat was dry. "What am I doing here?" His voice echoed inside his head, amplified as if in the vacancy of a steel drum, making the dimly seen room spin for a moment.

"Don't exert yourself just yet. Stay still. You've been under sedation and it may take a few moments to wear off. This is Dr. Hallweg's Clinic. You remember that much, surely?"

He wanted to snarl at her cooing reassurance. If he had remembered he would not have asked. But, as he drew breath to abuse her, he did remember.

"Mental home!" he growled, as it came back. All of it in a sudden flood. The new particles, the exciting, challenging, utterly *new* results. The struggle to order his straining mind to throw off old routine patterns and seek, feverishly, a new angle, some new way of looking at the discoveries from the accelerator so that they made sense. Symmetry, there had to be symmetry, somehow. There came that irritating impatience of hovering on the brink of a completely novel

and exciting vision. That came back. And with it the headache returned too. He had been right to fear the peaceful oblivion wouldn't last. It hadn't. He sagged back on his pillows as his brain began, all over again, to leap and hammer inside his skull.

"I want to see Hallweg," he mumbled, wincing against the explosive throbbing in his head.

"Of course," she nodded. "I'll just bring your breakfast and then I'll inform Dr. Hallweg you wish to see him."

He had dismissed her from his mind before she had left the room. She was no more than a human shape wearing the habiliments of her profession and the whole of her personality painted on that part of her that showed above the neck. For the rest she was nothing, just like all the rest. No more than a mannered mincing moron performing a set of meaningless motions, acting out the charade they called life. Living! Lord, what did any of them know of the blood-racing thrill, the inner intoxication of wrestling with elusive concepts? How could they appreciate the thrill of trying to compass the secret of the energies of the entire universe in one logical thought-pattern? How could they, when half the time they didn't even know the workings of the fumbling thoughts in their own minds.

Fools all. Except, perhaps, Hallweg. The orange-juice was cold and good, just right to scrape away the last thickness of sedation after-taste. Caine savoured it, consumed the cereal and coffee that stood ready, grimly ignoring the head-splitting eruptions in his brain and thought about Hallweg. The man had an enviable reputation. Almost all this psychotherapy business was "quack", of course. Pseudo-science and suggestion, tailor-made for silly old women of both sexes, most of it, but the story was that Hallweg was one of the newer experts. Eclectic behaviourism, or something like that.

At any rate, he had been a last resort. Caine had gone to him in desperation. "Somebody has got to be able to do something," he had insisted, "about these hideous brain-bursting headaches of mine. I've been other places and they

can find nothing physically wrong. Short of taking off the top of my head for a look inside, they can do nothing. I'm hoping you can."

Of course Hallweg had informed himself of the previous opinions, before the interview. His reaction had been calm. "Nothing simple or soothing, Professor Caine. Not for you. That might work with the hysterics and hypochondriacs, but you're not that type. If I'm to do anything at all for you I must begin by insisting you put yourself completely in my hands, my care. I also insist on complete rest for three or four days——"

"Impossible. Can't be done. Rest? Other people may know how to stop thinking, but I can't. Doctor, I'm like an artist in the throes of creation. I have the vision. I have everything in flux, in the air. I'm juggling to get it just right. I *know* that if I stop—I lose it!"

"If you do not stop, you lose your mind. Choose!"

There had been finality in Hallweg's voice. And, of course, there was no choice at all. Caine drained the coffee cup, swung the bed-tray to one side and leaned back on the pillows again. His brain was a two-lobed senseless growth, jerking and leaping in mad desire to burst out of his skull, knocking his vision into shimmers with each pulse.

"All I want is something to stop these damned headaches. Is that so exorbitant a request?" Even after submitting to Hallweg's dictatorship he had repeated that request. He mumbled it now, remembering the way the doctor had smiled, without mirth.

"Nothing is ever as simple as it seems, Caine. Who should know that better than you? The headaches are only a symptom, one symptom. There are others. You are sick. I could put a name to it, but that wouldn't help you. I need to know why and you can't tell me because you don't know. Not consciously, that is."

All in all it had not been a satisfactory interview. All the usual evasions and half-truths, the superficial trappings of wisdom, but now, this morning, after a good night's sleep, he determined to have something hard and fast from the

expert, or know why. He heard the click of the door and sat up to see Hallweg come in and turn to close the door after him. Odd how anonymous the man looked in his long white coat, its high-necked collar cutting off his head abruptly. And how fleshless his face was, those high cheekbones and thin mouth, enigmatic eyes half-hidden behind rimless glasses and the thin wisps of dark hair drawn carefully across and over the high-domed skull. Like a death's head!

"Good morning, Caine."

"Is it? Sunshine and birdsong? It takes more than that to make a day for me. I am far more interested in positive action, results, answers of some kind. How long before you can tell me something definite?"

Hallweg made a smile that was simply reflex, a baring of his teeth. Then he was serious again. "We have not been idle. We have done quite a lot in the past three days——"

"Three days? But it was only yesterday——!"

"You have been in controlled sedation and narco-analysis for three very busy days, Caine. Busy for us, that is. I think you are a realist, aren't you? Ready to hear some hard news? A shock?"

Caine leaned back, squeezing his eyes tight shut against the infernal trip-hammers in his skull. "Prepared? What difference does it make? I'm going to get it, prepared or not. You obviously haven't been able to cure anything yet."

"The headaches? I can give you something for those, an easement." There came a rustle and then the rattle-click of a bottle full of tablets being put on the bedside table. "Take one as needed, but with care. They are potent. They may produce a sense of unreality, of detachment, of dream-indifference. But they will ease the head-pains."

"All right. Thank you. Now, what's the bad news? What?" Caine opened his eyes to see Hallweg leaning close with his finger extended.

"You have an incurable condition," the finger came and touched to Caine's forehead just once, firmly, "here. Quite incurable. There is nothing anyone can do."

For one miraculous-awful moment the blinding headache vanished, and then it came back with doubled force. "Incurable? How long——?"

"I can tell you exactly. You have forty-eight hours."

Forty-eight hours? Caine flinched internally, felt the pain blink away again into a delicious moment of suspended bliss. Death would be like that. Without pain. Then, like opening a door again, the excruciating trip-hammer restarted. So, too, did his critical faculties. He stared at the impassive doctor.

"Forty-eight hours? You can be so positive? No hope, nothing?"

"In this case," Hallweg nodded fractionally, "I can be precise. It is unusual, almost unique. But quite positive. I am sorry."

The last words were meaningless noise. Caine let himself slump back against the pillows. Forty-eight hours to live. So much for the mad-ball problems of particle-physics, of the fascinating but baffling interplay of pion and muon, cascade-particles, omega-minus and strangeness factors, and all the other engrossing problems that had been the whole of his life for twenty years. To what point, now? The whole of his integrity, his reason for living, crumbled and fell in on itself in a scatter of meaningless abstractions and fictions. Finish. What the devil could he do that was worth doing, in forty-eight hours? Hallweg's voice, cold, restrained and firm, cut through the fog in his brain.

"You are not the type that asks 'What shall I do now?' Professor Caine, so I venture to offer a suggestion. You are still my charge, if you wish it, therefore my responsibility. May I help?"

"How can you? What can you do?"

"A little. Or a lot, depending on your viewpoint. Let me make one limitation first. I ask that you do not leave this estate. It is quite spacious. In this building and the grounds you are free to do whatever you wish. Please understand me. Spacious grounds and a large establishment are at your disposal. The whole is exceedingly well-designed and

equipped to meet your every need. Everything you could possibly want is here. My staff will do whatever you ask. I myself will be continuously available, when you need me. You may do anything, absolutely anything you wish."

Caine lay still, vainly trying to grasp the disconnected fragments of what had once been a life. He felt Hallweg's cool firm touch at his wrist and a gentle pressure. "This will help you a little. I leave you now. Remember your tablets. Remember, you may do anything you wish."

Caine endured the stamping in his head for a few more seconds then sat up and reached for the tablet-bottle. And saw the thing on his left wrist. A watch? He drew it close and saw that it wasn't quite that. It had a flat face with windows and numerals. He saw 47 and 55, and as he stared the 55 clicked and became 54. The meaning dawned on him and he didn't know whether to be grateful or appalled. This hellish device was counting down his remaining minutes and hours! Shocked, he sat up, pulled back the bed-linen and swung his legs to the floor, discovering that he was quite naked. Start from scratch, he thought, then wondered where *that* thought had come from. He tried to stand and the room tilted and spun, the double-throb of agony in his head shattering his vision into ripples. The tablets! He got the bottle, shook one into his palm and gulped it rapidly. Inside two deep ragged breaths the awful pain went away to a distant murmur and he was able to stand, and turn, and survey the room.

He saw now that his first "clinical" impression was quite wrong. It was much more like a bedroom in some luxury hotel. All of one wall was an enormous built-in wardrobe full of clothing, with a far greater choice than he would have believed possible. If ever he had been one for dressing up, this was his chance. But he had never been and was not now concerned with superficial appearance. Some things were pointlessly a waste of time and dressing-up was one. Caine satisfied himself with simplicity, choosing dark-grey slacks and a matching shirt with open neck and short sleeves. A pair of soft suede shoes in the same colour felt

comfortable over black socks. He moved to the window and looked out and down over a wide green lawn, a pool that sparkled in the sun, flower-beds and winding pathways. Trees in the distance. And people. Not many, about twenty or so, and all apparently normal and peaceful, moving and talking in twos and threes, or sitting, and a few splashing in the pool. And a few white-coated attendants here and there. He pondered just a moment to decide whether he would join them or not, and the answer was negative.

"When did I ever need people?" he asked the empty room. Certainly not now. He had once heard one of his more philosophical colleagues declare that people who needed people were immature and deficient in intelligence and he had agreed with that without completely understanding it. Now, idly looking at the room, he noticed a large bureau by the door and a flame of curiosity lit itself in his mind. Hallweg had stressed how excellently this place was equipped. It would be interesting to see just what was in that thing, what the doctor had thought of.

The answer, when he hauled out the top drawer and looked, was something of a shock. It was full of pistols and guns of all kinds. A long-forgotten pleasure returned to him as he investigated with his fingers, to touch and grasp a tiny mother-of-pearl thing, and then a blue-steel automatic, a heavy, short-muzzled revolver obviously meant to be concealed in a pocket, a Luger—at a guess—and then one that his fingers coveted, a long-barrelled Western-style revolver. It snuggled into his hand as if of long habit. Long-suppressed childhood memories showed him how to flip out the catch and break the weapon, exposing the fresh-bright cartridge circles. A flick of the wrist and the gun was lethal again. He spun, aimed, imagined the shock and slam of the explosion, and a thrill tingled his hand and arm. He'd never had a gun. They would never let him. But "they" weren't here now. He juggled the weapon just once more, then jammed it into the waistband of his pants. Cartridges too. He shook open a box and stuffed a handful into a pocket.

Anything you wish, Hallweg had said. And that thought prompted another, so that he glanced at his wrist and saw 47-15.

He moved to the door, pulled it open, and suddenly there was noise, the sound of distant voices and music. It was as if he was now entering the world again. In that same moment he had an uncanny sense of being detached, of standing off watching himself perform. He had had this many times before, and hoped that he would have it on that bright moment when he stumbled on the great secret he was chasing. A sense of history. "It was precisely at such-and-such a moment that I discovered——" But now, and the thought was sourly grim, it would never happen. Too late. His head began to throb again and he turned back hurriedly to collect the tablet-bottle, to stuff it in a pocket and then go through the door this time, into a panelled and carpeted passage. A glance at his wrist showed him 46.

He came to the head of a grand staircase and into a ground-swell of chatter and music and movement. The staircase went down in a long sweeping curve, seemed to entice his feet so that he felt unsteady and afraid. Nausea came, and he clung to a banister. The double-beat in his head grew vicious and he fumbled at the bottle again, managed to get a tablet on to his palm and into his mouth. Hallweg had said they were potent, but what did it matter now. Just so long as they killed that splitting ache!

"Norman!" A familiar voice sliced through his haze as the temple-twitches eased off. He stared down. Muriel, his wife, stood at the stair foot and looked up at him with an expression he knew well, that compound of dutiful smile and suppressed irritation. "Norman, dear, do come down and join us. Come along!"

He scowled at her while the pain-throbs moved back in his head to where skull and spine joined. "What are you doing here?"

"To be with you, dear. Of course. It's my duty, after all. But do come down and join us. Join in. Have a good time. Let yourself go, just for once!"

Without knowing quite how, he had somehow moved halfway down the stairs and she had come up, so that they stood close, face to face. The rest of the crowd, the bright dresses and white linen, the faces, and the lilting music, all that went out of focus and remote, behind a thin veil of mist. Part of his mind wondered at the phenomenon and dismissed almost at once as a side-effect of those damned tablets. Hallweg had said so. But the major part of his attention was on her.

"I can't join you," he offered as a beginning, "because I'm not dressed for it, as you can see."

"You never are, dear."

"Besides, I don't *want* to join in."

"You never do, never!" Her face, once fine-boned and beautiful, was now lean and hard, and it could become waspish with very little provocation, as it did now. "You've never had any time for me and my friends."

He choked down on anger as he had always done and tried reason. "You make it sound important. Join in. Join in what? Tittering, gossip, chit-chat and socializing? For what? What does it achieve?"

"Don't be tiresome," she rebuked him as if he was a child. "One just goes along with the stream, taking part. Not for any reason or purpose, at all. Just for the fun of it. Life isn't all reason and purpose, dear, not all the time. Relax. Be human, just for once!"

The trite phrase struck sudden fury in his mind, awakened the murderous double-throb at the back of his brain and this time he made no effort at all to choke back his rage.

"Human? You and your like will never be human if you live a thousand years. You're just a dressed-up animal, jerking to impulses you don't understand, herding like a bunch of sheep because you're afraid to be alone with yourself." He swept a ferocious glance around the crowd but they were still cloaked with the anonymity of the grey haze. In a different world. And so was she. He knew by the look on

her face that he wasn't getting his point across. He never had. The futility of it maddened him.

"You *need* them!" he gestured to the ghost-like mob. "You need to be with people so that you'll never have to look at your own insides and discover how empty they are. If you were alone, you'd go mad!"

"I believe you *are* mad. Not ill at all. Mad!" She was quite ugly now in her rage. "You and your stupid particles and things. Who cares? They aren't real, just silly theories. What good are they? Do they care for you, try to make you happy? Do they?"

"Thirty-eight years wasted," he threw it at her, "just because I was foolish enough, just once, to want to be like the mob and get married. To you! All my life down the drain, just because you haven't the sense to leave me alone!"

"Oh, come on!" She put her hand on his arm to tug at him. "Come and join in and enjoy yourself——"

"Leave me alone!" he shouted, glaring, flinging her hand off. "It's as simple as that, but you've never understood that I like to be alone, I *need* to be alone. You could never understand that"—and somehow, as his gesturing hand brushed against it, the revolver came into his grip, and he aimed it at her, suddenly cold and determined—"because you would have to begin by admitting that there are things in the world more important than you are, and you're too conceited ever to let that idea enter your head."

She was quite still, blue eyes wide, her thin face frozen in horror but still without any understanding of what he was trying to say. The cream-satin of her high-necked dress gave her the same floating-head appearance he had seen with Hallweg. Anonymity and meaninglessness. He squeezed the trigger. The gun kicked powerfully. The smashing explosion shocked his ears. She jerked back, spinning half-round with the impact, a bright scarlet bloom spreading over her chest, then she went tumbling and jolting down the stairs like a broken doll.

The lighting seemed to grow dim and recede, in a dreadful hush. In the swirling confusion in his head, Caine

groped for something substantial to cling to. He became aware that Hallweg was standing by his side, silent and watchful. He looked from the smoking weapon in his hand to the cold and bloodless face of the doctor, and of all the things that tumbled and swirled in his head, the words he could have said, those which came were stupidly inane.

"You said," and his voice was shrill, like a child, "that I could do anything I wanted to. Anything! You said so!"

"Yes." Hallweg nodded fractionally. "I said that. My responsibility."

"I never could talk to her, you know. Could never discuss anything, or share ideas, or get her to see—never. And she was always interrupting my ideas with her silly chatter. You know?"

"Yes." Hallweg nodded again. "I know. Perhaps you'd be better outside, in the fresh air? Just a suggestion, of course."

Again without quite knowing how, Caine found himself out in the sunshine, treading on green grass. The sunlight was warm on his face and the double-thump in his head was there but bearable. He had some trouble in focusing. That group over there, they looked like some of the laboratory staff, surely? He angled across the grass in that direction and then saw that he was in error. Odd. There came to him the first suspicion that this whole business was some kind of dream. Or was it those tablets? That group, as he could now see, was no more than a gaggle of gawky youths fooling about, horseplaying, jabbering at each other. One broke free, came loping to him.

"Dad! I was hoping to see you. I'm short."

Caine stared at the shock-haired sixteen-year-old he had sired as if he was seeing a stranger. He translated, angrily.

"Money? Are you asking for more money, again?"

"Don't be like that." The face grinned engagingly. "You know how it is. A man's got to keep up. My old jet-bike has had it. I need a new——"

"You need? For what?"

"Like I told you, to keep up. All the other fellows have 'em. I'm always the last to get with it. Always!"

There was mild reproof under the grin now. That face, it could have been attractive had it been organized, was criticizing him. It went on, slightly bitter. "You don't care, do you? Like the way I feel, always having to beg for things, seeking favours——"

"Why the devil don't you apply yourself to something worth while? You had an education. When are you going to use it? Do something with your life, instead of wasting it!"

"Aw, Dad!"

Caine felt his fury boil up again. Another useless fool. He was enmeshed in them, plagued by them. His head-splitting agony came back, pressing into the front of his brain, shattering his vision. He snatched a glance at his wrist, saw 44-25. The boy became sullen.

"What kind of a job can I get? Before I can open my mouth they know I'm the son of the famous Professor Caine and they expect sparks to come out of my ears. Me! Like I'm expected to be brilliant and you're the only one in the family with brains. You've said so a thousand times."

The head-hammering grew to torture. Caine groped for the tablets. His hand brushed the revolver-butt. By itself it slid into his hand. For one poised moment of horror-clarity he had doubts. Again? He had shot his wife. Now David? But then he heard Hallweg's assurance like an echo in his mind. "Anything you wish." And only forty-eight hours. Less than that, now. So what did it matter? He levelled the gun, saw David back off and show fear.

"Useless nothing-person," he whispered. "No use to yourself or anyone else. Parasite. Wasting my precious time!" And he squeezed the trigger, winced at the roar, felt the gun leap and kick, saw David stagger back and spin away down to the ground in a crumpled heap. He felt no remorse at all, but a giddy sense of relief. If only he had been smart enough to do this a long time ago. A discussion started itself up in his head.

"Life is sacred."

"Is it? Automatically? Isn't life, *per se*, just a phenomenon?"

"But still sacred."

"Rubbish. There's a difference between a virgin chunk of marble and a statue. Both are lumps of stone, but one has had work done on it. The unworked life is just a thing, a nothing. Sacred?"

"All life is sacred."

Caine listened to the argument, feeling curiously weightless and insubstantial. All at once he realized that Hallweg was with him again. He stuffed the smoking gun away, stared at the doctor defiantly.

"I shot him, too."

"Yes."

"Utterly worthless. Should have done it long ago."

"First your wife, now your son."

"The possessive adjective," Caine pointed out with icy clarity, "is misleading. They didn't belong to me, nor I to them. No one owns anyone else, nor should anyone try to. We are all individuals. Self-determined. Isn't that so? You should know, you're the expert!"

"Yes." Hallweg seemed disconcerted by the point-blank question. "You can live only your own life, of course, not anyone else's. Would you care to swim?"

The sense of unreality was strong now. Those tablets. Or was it a dream after all? It seemed real enough. Caine moved towards the pool. The edge was tiled in blue and white. There were young men, and half a dozen or so girls, young ladies, young women—Caine searched his mind for a term but couldn't find one to fit these sleek, well-filled, well-endowed, over-exposed young animals. Bodies, he thought, to rival anything produced by classical Greece. But the Greeks had been thinkers too. *Mens sana in corpore sano*. An ideal, of course. But what about ideal and healthy bodies containing no more wit than a moronic child? What would the Greeks have thought, for instance, of that one there, screeching and cavorting in so-called fun? The "crea-

ture" halted and turned, all giggles and breathless. He knew her. Susan. His daughter. Recalling his own words to Hallweg, he amended that hastily. Not his daughter any longer, but the wife of someone else. Mrs. Susan Harvey. And there was young Eustace Harvey, scrambling out of the water, putting on his well-greased smile, extending his hand.

"Hello there, Professor Caine. Nice to see you. Look here, Sue!"

"Why, Dad!" She came to seize his arm and beam at him. "We've been wanting to see you. Eustace has this wonderful opportunity——"

"No, Sue," the young man protested. "We can't impose——"

"Silly!" She hushed him. "Of course we can. That's what Dads are for! He won't mind a bit. He'll want to help." She squeezed his arm fondly and began rattling it off in bright eager phrases. Eustace would be rich and prestigious in no time at all—well, it *would* take a little while and they would be dreadfully poor during that period if they had to scrape. But surely dear kind Dad would see his way clear to helping them out, just for a while? A loan, of course!

"I've no idea when we'd ever be able to repay," Eustace mumbled. "We never seem able to make ends meet, somehow. There's always something we need, something to soak up the extra."

Caine shook his head slowly. Poor Eustace! He was too young to be told, still had all his ideals going full blast. In time he would learn that he had hung a millstone round his neck, but by then it would be too late. Too late! He glanced at his wrist. 40-22. His time-dregs were running faster now. There was urgency. He checked Susan's enthusiastic monologue with a curt word.

"Nothing. You get nothing from me, not any more. Live your own life. Scrape and go short, and learn to appreciate——"

"You don't *mean* that! You can't——"

"I can, and I do. If you're incapable of being anything but a useless parasite, suck his blood, not mine!"

"Steady on, sir!" Eustace protested flushing. "There's no need for that kind of tone!"

Caine swung his gaze away, then back to Susan and saw shrewish rage ripple across her immature features, making her uncannily like her mother.

"You!" she shrielled. "You miserable, dried-up machine. You never lived, never had fun, not in all your life, and you can't see why anybody else would want to. Scrape and go poor! You *would* say that. That's you. Nothing must ever come easy, according to you. That's all I've ever had from you. Work at it; study it; struggle; save up for it! You never *gave* anything to anybody in all your life!"

"That's not true!" His voice thickened in his throat and it was as if two heavily armoured knights battled inside his skull. "I have always been ready to give you what I have. Facts, data, information——"

"Who wants those?" she shrieked at him. "I want to live, to have the good things——" and all by itself, again, the revolver was in his hand and pointing, the uproar in his brain half-blinding him. Her screeching protest died away in shivering dread. The gun bucked and roared, a red splotch materialized on her ribs and she jerked backwards and fell into the pool. Eustace sprang in wild rage and Caine staggered as a flying fist caught him on the cheekbone. Catching his balance he swung and aimed, the gun roared again and the young man buckled and went down.

Caine stood still, cringing against the hideous clamour in his brain, the scene coming and going in blurred pulses of clarity. A small voice in the confusion insisted that this was all wrong. It couldn't be real. It had to be a dream, an illusion of some kind. But against that he could feel the scraping pain of the bruise on his face. Driving himself, he fumbled out the tablet-bottle and gulped one, shuddered as it went down. Calm. He was amazed at his own calm. Deliberately, he broke the revolver and ejected the empties, reloaded carefully. It didn't feel like a dream at all. He saw his wrist, and the numerals had run back to 20-26.

Acceleration? Time, the ancient enigma. It was the only physical-world effect that had no mirror-counterpart. Everything else had parity, or should have. Even particles. A plus to match a minus. They had to be that way, to make a coherent pattern. But not time. That stream flowed only in one direction. Odd, that. For a dizzy moment he felt he was on the brink of immense understanding. Then Hallweg coughed, at his elbow.

"Can I help, Caine?"

"This is all a dream, isn't it?"

Hallweg shrugged, reached a lean hand to touch the bruise on his face. "Does that feel like a dream?"

"But—if it's real——" He took a moment to stare round the sunlit grounds. "I've killed four people!"

"I accept full responsibility, Caine. I said you could do anything you wished, remember? Now, let me see, you have fifteen hours left."

"Fifteen?" Caine peered unbelievably at his wrist, then thrust the matter away in favour of something more urgent. "Look here, that's not the point. The thing is, I am not and never have been a violent person. How can I kill people? It isn't me at all!"

Now Hallweg smiled a mean smile. "I have accepted full responsibility for what you do, Caine, but not for what you are. You alone can do that. You have ten hours."

Caine stared again at his wrist and the minute counter was spinning wildly backwards as if his few remaining hours were anxious to be gone. Time. If only one could halt it. Or reverse it? That immense concept brushed his mind again, and lingered. Reverse time. Change the sign. Decay from the omega-minus, strangeness minus three, to strangeness minus two, and so-on. But suppose one postulated a strangeness-plus? The buzzing cloud of shifting concepts danced tantalisingly just out of reach and then transformed into a clamour of hoarse voices demanding his attention. Furious at the interruption he glared about him and they were charging at him from all directions. Gross people. Waving arms. Furious faces. Familiar faces. There was old

Levy, his research-chief—the pompous old fool. And Masters, who treated the accelerator-data as if it was his own personal property. And that silly woman who kept boobing with the computer data, Miss Watkins. Lord, there was old Fowler-Lyons, his old science-master, the idiot. And Wilford, who had given him such a foul start in mathematics.

Caine swung his head in an arc, glaring at them, hating them all. A crowd of fools and fumlbers, getting in his way, putting him off, misleading, wasting time. He dragged out the revolver again and began firing wildly, shot after shot. Smoke stung his nostrils, got in his eyes. The hoarse voices rose to a roar. There was darkness that faded into grey murk and through it the single, lean, white-robed figure of Hallweg.

“You’re almost finished, Caine. Only a little while longer.”

Caine felt the weapon sag heavy in his hand. He used the other hand to hoist and brace it, brought it steady and with careful aim. He felt a desperate uncaring certainty.

“Your doing, Hallweg. All of it. You’ve destroyed me, haven’t you?”

“That is so, Professor Caine. I have destroyed you.”

Caine sobbed, squeezed the trigger, shook to the explosion, fired again and again until there came the futile click of the hammer on a spent cartridge. Then he threw the gun away and fell forward into black darkness.

After an age there came a small glow, growing brighter. Cool fingers on his wrist. Caine opened his eyes to find he was prone in bed again.

“So it was a dream!” He struggled to sit up, to see Hallweg standing by his side. On the white smock were three scarlet blotches in a tight group over the heart.

“Not quite a dream.” Hallweg smiled, not at all like a death’s head now. “You’ve had a busy time, Caine. Better rest a while. Tell me, though, any headaches now?”

Caine frowned, sent exploratory impulses round the inside of his head. Not so much as a twinge. He said so.

"It's all gone. I feel—clear and clean. There was no incurable complaint, after all?"

"Oh, but yes. It is still there." Hallweg chuckled. "You might call it acute fanatic obsession with a set of abstract ideas."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. Please explain."

"Of course. But allow me to make one point first. Over the years many people have been unable to understand you. You haven't been very good at explaining yourself in ways they would understand, right?"

"I suppose so. But, damn it, particle physics isn't easy to understand anyway. It *can't* be made simple."

"Granted. I dare say if you tried to explain it to me at this moment I wouldn't be able to grasp more than a tenth of it. But, now, is that my fault? Or yours? Or is it inherent in the nature of the problem?"

Caine looked at the propositions carefully then shrugged. "I suppose it's inherent in the material."

"So my failure to understand you does not necessarily mean that I am stupid, you agree?"

"Point taken," Caine nodded ruefully. "But please try to explain, and I'll try to understand. Why did I want to kill people? I didn't—not really—kill anyone? Did I?"

"Oh, yes. Effectively, yes. Now, simplifying drastically, it is like this. Never, not since you were very small, have you allowed yourself to be violent. You acquired a value that violence is opposite to reason. But, you know, violence is built into us. We are animals, like it or not. You have kept yours locked away, chained in the cold fires of reason, directing all your powers and passions into mental effort. To the point of explosion."

"The headaches," Caine murmured. "They certainly were explosive. Like some brutal force struggling to burst out. I exploded, didn't I?" He put out a finger to touch the red smears on Hallweg's coat. "I did that."

"You did. It was absolutely necessary that you *did* it. I'm not here concerned with imagery, repression-symbols, complexes and so forth. When a machine is burning itself out

because it's running with the brake hard on, one doesn't indulge in elaborate fuel-analysis. That kind of thing never did achieve much except for those who live by symbols instead of reality. Ever since Freud, various well-meaning people have tried to make talk-therapy work, but with very little success. Academically, yes, but the real effect comes from abreaction. Something concrete. Physical effort. One can't keep fit by doing mental push-ups, or slake a real thirst with imaginary wine. You had to feel free to actually do what you wanted to do."

Caine recalled the blasting roar and the kick of the gun in his hand, and, turning his head, he saw the revolver on his bedside table. "You say it wasn't a dream? I actually shot——"

"You were in narco-analysis for seventy-two hours. That was enough to locate and identify the stress-points, the people directly involved, and to recruit their assistance. They all care for you a great deal, in their various ways. Enough to be highly indignant when I explained your subconscious urges against them. Enough to be willing to cooperate in psycho-drama. And overwhelmingly convinced when you went ahead and relieved your true feelings about them. You're not the only one, Caine, who has gained from this therapy-session. Not by a long way."

"You mean," Caine whispered aghast, "that I actually did shoot my wife, and young David. And Sue and her husband?"

"Mr. Harvey was a slight error. He was not supposed to strike you, but he was so shocked by the way you acted that he forgot himself. They were all shocked. And convinced. The older figures from your past were staff members in disguise, of course, but the central cast was real. And I fancy you will find something of a change in their attitudes towards you in the future."

"And in mine. Lord! All that bottled up inside. No wonder I was cracking up!"

"The gun," Hallweg reached for it, juggled it fondly, "is

rather special. Plenty of kick and noise, but all it emits is a gelatine capsule stained red. Effective, yes?"

"So was that damned thing on my wrist. A fiendish touch!"

"A device for applying pressure. And pure illusion, that one. My analysis showed me you had a powerful block on time, that it meant a great deal to you. So I suggested the notion of a time limit and a counter. You imagined the rest yourself. There were no figures. The tablets, of course, were psychedelic, to heighten suggestibility. You make your own time, set your own pace——"

"Eh?" Caine opened his eyes wide. Feathers began tickling his skull on the inside. "Time, under control. That's it! Have you a pad and pencil, doctor? Quickly!" He snatched the equipment and began jabbing at the white surface with precise stabs of the pencil point. "Lambda. Strangeness minus one. Decay. Neutron. Proton. Anti-proton. Now——cascade. And omega minus. But if we can reverse the time-sign——"

"I don't understand," Hallweg complained, but Caine didn't hear him. He was having visions, reaching for symmetry, at last.

SHOCK TREATMENT

by

LEE HARDING

Australian author Lee Harding has a penchant for writing stories about "lonely" things, of cities and individuals and even alien things. Here, delicately portrayed, is the loneliness of the twilight of Man—brought there unexpectedly by his own inventiveness.

SHOCK TREATMENT

PIETRO stirred and opened his eyes. The face of the Keeper loomed over him. It was wise and considerate and was crowned by a magnificent mantle of long silver hair, and it was the most aged face he had ever seen. Now it smiled, and the pale bleached eyes looking down into his bore the weight of centuries.

"Now do you remember who you are, and why you are here?"

Pietro sat up upon his pallet. A residual confusion left him and was replaced by an eagerness to talk. The great walls of the Manse caught and reverberated his words. "Yes—now I can—remember."

"Then speak." The Keeper stepped aside so that he remained visible only on the periphery of Pietro's vision. "The Manse wishes to hear your story from your own lips."

Obediently Pietro's mind slid backwards and remembered the many details of the day.

Shortly before dawn a light rain had fallen to prepare the world for the burgeoning sunlight, and hardly had the first warm rays of the sun begun to finger the landscape than the delicate wisps of cloud had dissipated, their purpose served, so that only a clear sky canopied the waking earth. A soft breeze stirred somewhere and began nudging the temperate climate about its business and with this movement began the small beginnings of the day.

He had been awake for some time, lying with his hands clasped together behind his head. He had watched the morning sky change from a searing vermilion to a gentle blue and had pondered upon the many sunrises of the world, and how each seemed different to the day before (and here it was the distance he had travelled since yesterday and the subtle but definite change in the landscape that

provided the important factor of *difference*, and not the inhibited sky).

He sensed the quickening pulse of the land beneath him as the new day roused itself and contemplated the impending doom of mankind. Man might indeed be shuffling unwittingly towards oblivion but the very land he trod and had so carelessly sown would outlast his passing. The earth renewed itself with the dawn of each new day, patient with the restrictions which man, in his haste, had imposed upon it, content to endure until the end of time, when all things must cease. Yet, he mused, it seemed a pity that we—who dreamed so much—were not made more durable.

He had slept well and now his identity sought to reassert itself from among the dark folds of sleep. Slowly the tattered puzzle that was himself came together again and could be assessed. A sense of urgency accelerated the otherwise lethargic process of coming to full awareness—but was such haste necessary? The air was so mild this morning and hardly inducive to strenuous thinking, more amenable to casual reflection than to concentrated . . .

He sat up quickly. Momentarily his personality asserted itself over the malignant something that gobbled his thoughts and the desire for inertia was circumvented. His head cleared and the world around him snapped into sharper focus.

This was what Dominus had warned them about. This was why . . .

He raised one hand and touched with his fingertips the small grey cube fastened behind his left ear. He stroked it gently, drawing confidence from its smooth surface. Now the day no longer seemed comforting and the prospect of extended indolence unlikely now that the anxious little machine was busily tapping out its urgent message.

"The mornings will be the most dangerous time," Dominus had warned. "Your personality will have to struggle to reassert itself as a *whole*. In sleep it disintegrates and must be pulled back together again and if the mind is sluggish then the stimulator may have difficulty getting through.

Once you are fully awake the danger lessens. I can help you against the burden of the days, but the nights . . . the nights are unpredictable."

Filled again with the urgency of his mission, Pietro stood up and proffered an open palm to the invisible canopy which had protected him from the cold night air. The field weakened enough and he walked through. His bare feet trod moist, crisp grass and his skin tingled agreeably against the fresh mountain air. He wore only a pair of pale, fitted shorts, leaving behind the sleek sandals he usually wore. It had been many eons since man had had to cosset his body against the elements of the world.

He saw that he had slept in a slight hollow cradled by some unfamiliar trees and to refresh his mind he ascended the rise ahead and found himself facing east. The ground sloped gently down towards a shallow creek and beyond that the foothills faded away into the smudgy anonymity of the plains. Behind him and to the north-west the grass thinned rapidly and the first gaunt peaks of the escarpment thrust arrogantly skywards.

The world basked peacefully under the benevolent sun and there was no sign of man upon the face of the land, or none that he could see. Then a soft voice was borne to him upon the shoulders of the breeze and he heard sounds of splashing, such as a child might make with white palms slapping against water. The song seemed more like humming, a tuneful ululation to the newly-risen sun.

He began walking down towards the creek and as he approached the source of the sound the voice became louder and assumed a familiar quality. He stood for a moment and listened intently but could make out no words, only a soft, gentle crooning.

She came towards him from out of the shadows of some tall, benign willows and moved slowly downstream, her golden body wet and glistening in the sunlight, the cool water sucking at her calves, her breasts swaying gently in time with the movements of her arms as she essayed what could have been an ancient and simple dance movement

plucked unknowingly from the rich confusion of her memories. Her eyes were soft and dreamy with the wisdom of a child and when she saw him her song died. They looked at each other and no words passed between them. Then she smiled and bent over to slap the water gently with her open hands.

"Selena," he said. Some threadbare memory cast her name upon his lips. "*Selena . . .*"

She did not answer, but instead pressed her cupped hands to her lips. Captured water trickled through her fingers. Her eyes dipped and followed the dazzle of sunlight dappling the surface of the creek and saw how it was swallowed by the wide shadows further on and how it reappeared again a little way ahead. She moved off downstream taking her workless song with her.

Pietro turned slowly like a man in a dream and looked back the way he had come. He remembered the rumpled bed where they—not just he—had slept, how their naked bodies had rested secure in the airskiff and had been protected by the strong field of force, how . . .

How they had forgotten.

Now he could see the tiny smudge the stimulator made behind her ear and he remembered the growing, glassy look in her eyes and how he had feared for this day. She bent again to the water and he turned away, anguish burning what was left of his feelings.

He walked along the bank in search of her discarded skirt but even as he looked his concentration wavered and his feet took him off at a tangent to the creek and he wandered uphill and past the skiff, the bright glitter of its controls lost to him while his eyes fixed intently upon the mountains ahead. His mind was responding to the urgent pulsations of current the stimulator fed, but it was a mindless little machine and it only instilled in him the importance of his mission and placed any other thoughts on the periphery of his activities. So he forgot Selena, as she had forgotten him, and the stubborn spark of awareness that remained was firmly fixed upon his goal.

The blood began to surge quickly through his body and this in turn assisted the stimulator in its work and cleared his mind even more. He felt the bracing sting of the air and saw the sun strike brilliant shards of light from the topmost peaks ahead of him. He heard the sound of his own eager breath and felt the firm pressure of his bare feet upon the grass and, regularly, at ten-minute intervals, the subtle but insistent little stab of current from the stimulator enter his mind and shake loose the important memories.

Remember—he must *remember*!

His name was Pietro and ahead of him, beyond the mountains or nearer than that, was the Great Engine of the world. And he would find it. Now. At last. And for Dominus and for all mankind. If it existed. If it was *there*.

He kept thinking this for a very long time. It drowned the search for other memories, for Selena, for the reason he walked on foot when he could have taken the skiff, for the madness of his quest. It pushed aside the pain of his bloodied feet as he blundered his way up the narrow mountain pathway towards he knew not what, and when his weary body finally protested and collapsed and the weight of his exertions sundered his determination, the thought of his name and of his mission kept alive that priceless thing called sanity when everything else that had been important to him became lost and all churned together amidst the wreckage of his memories.

The Keeper stepped forward. "But that was yesterday. There is more . . ."

And indeed there was. Pietro's fingers found no small cube behind his ear but instead many cables and wires attached to his skull, but they did not frighten him. They were, he realized, an improvement upon the original stimulator and as such had been responsible for his recovery.

He remembered now that he had not always been alone and that there had been others before Selena. Many seekers had shared his quest but he had long since forgotten their names and these could not be brought back. Their task had

been to locate the Great Engine of the world, and quickly, because . . .

"We are dying," Dominus had said. "Not today, not tomorrow, but perhaps the generation after this—if there is another." There was a malaise, a sickness, so insidious that it could not be isolated, analysed and acted upon. It had something to do with the mind, with the soul, whatever it was, but its effect was upon the genes of mankind. "We are *forgetting*. We are losing the ability to concentrate because there is nothing that *needs* concentrating upon." It was hereditary and had already passed down through many generations. There had been no children in Landomar for decades. People had not so much lost the will to live but the urge to procreate and the birth-rate no longer existed. Instead their eyes glazed over in comfort and their senses atrophied and were forgotten. They lived but that was all. They became homeostats.

"We are in stasis," Dominus cried, "and unless we find a cure for this sickness we will die. The human race will cease to exist."

But the sickness was somewhere in the mind where the machines could not advise and the ability to communicate with their metal guardians was another of the skills forgotten by mankind. They made use of their cities and their skiffs and the countless machines that served them, but they no longer knew how or why such things worked and no longer cared.

Except for Dominus. He had been the last of the great Thinkers and he it was who devised a means of circumventing the sickness. He utilized his guttering knowledge of the mind to fashion the tiny cubes and contained within them the minute electrical charges and used them to bring a handful of people from out of their pleasurable torpor, and thrust the urgency of their unused memories upon them.

Pietro had been one of the few. "And this is only temporary," Dominus explained. "The stimulators will help you to think efficiently, they will assist your recall and dis-

courage slothful thoughts, but they are not a *cure*. For that we must seek elsewhere. We must find the Great Engine."

The Great Engine?

A thing of legend, surely? Or so insisted Pietro's revitalized memories. But Dominus insisted, logically, that such an Engine must exist, otherwise the world would collapse into chaos. The Planners had been men and would have planned for such an eventuality as this. Somewhere there must be an Ultimate machine responsible for All. If they could find it and present the problem of the malaise then perhaps all would be well. The cure was beyond the faltering minds of men and the guardians the Planners had built—but if there was a Great Engine then surely it would possess the ultimate knowledge and the solution to their plight?

This was his hope, his fervent wish, his only answer. And he sent them forth to find it.

Pietro could remember the first thrill of being abroad in the world. Travelling from one small hamlet to another he recaptured some of the feeling of the First Travellers and his keen observations underlined the urgency of Dominus's warning. The human race had fragmented and wandered off along individual byways. People had closed down their minds and blissfully followed whatever whim possessed their simple thoughts. Intercourse, both social and sexual, no longer existed. Communication had become bankrupt and had been discarded for the balm of abundance. Some sought the open spaces of the land and settled down comfortably wherever they chose. The world cared for them for that was the function of the world.

Others preferred the comfort of townships and some, like Pietro and his companions, chose to wander, but their eyes were lack-lustre and a smile was the limit of their indulgence and he found them dull company. The bountiful world looked after them and surely there was no further motivation for their existence?

Sometimes he travelled alone, sometimes with a friend, for their unfamiliarity of the terrain was such that their

paths frequently crossed. They had no aids other than their own perceptions. Maps no longer existed and a villager's knowledge of the rest of the world hardly extended beyond his own small area of ground or the dull thoughts within his own head.

So they wandered and wound about the face of the earth, their paths ever crossing with no plan, no skilled application to their search. And as they wandered their ranks diminished.

"I cannot say how long the devices will remain effective," Dominus had said. "Once you are abroad there is no way of knowing how your minds will react to the insistent pulses. Perhaps they will . . . adapt. And if they do then you are doomed like your fellow men. That is why haste is important. Before . . ."

Before they too succumbed to the sickness.

Pietro rolled restlessly upon the pallet. He had forgotten so much that even the powerful stimulus provided by the Manse could not revive. The names of his friends, the towns, the lands he had visited and the people he had forced conversation upon. How long had it been since Dominus had farewelled them and sent them forth upon their quest?

Time . . . *time* was an invention of the Thinker and his clever little cubes. They had resurrected an awareness of a progression of space beyond the limitations of night and day and provided a fresh burden for their weary minds.

"But you found the Manse," the Keeper pointed out.

"Yes." He had, and he smiled, and remembered.

In the last town they had visited they had found another Thinker. Frail and lonely he sat in his eyrie high above the city and told them of the Manse of the Keepers. "But I have heard of no 'Great Engine'," he said. "Although I see no reason to doubt that the Planners created such an organism." He nodded his head sagaciously. "Yes, such a concept is . . . tenable. As a . . . as a youth I heard tell of this place beyond the mountains—or was it actually *in* the mountains?—where the Keepers look after the running of the

world. Of course, I cannot vouch for the authenticity of the tale, but . . ."

"We have been chasing phantoms such as this for many years," Selena had whispered, and with the memory of her words came her face and the anguish of her loss. Pain twisted Pietro's face into a grimace but he could not hold back the tumbling cascade of recent memories.

"One is much the same as another," she added. "Tell me, great Thinker, how might we reach these high and lofty mountains?"

The Thinker had regarded her strangely. His lips moved uncertainly and his eyes shifted sideways towards Pietro. "Why . . . why . . . however did you come here then, my child?"

Her eyelids fluttered and then a dim spark lit up her eyes. "By . . . we came by skiff." Of course, she had *forgotten*.

They both looked upon her in silence. Pietro saw the deadly film already settling in her eyes and felt the weight of the great inertia coming down upon them both. There wasn't much time left.

They left immediately. It was late afternoon and the quiet city soon lay far behind them and their fragile little craft crawled steadily towards the mountains to the north.

It had been many eons since man had hurried and his machines had likewise adapted to his needs. But Pietro had always been impatient for the slow speed of his craft and had often champed impatiently as it drifted inadequately at a handful of miles per hour. Had the pulse of life slowed so much?

By dusk the ramparts reached hesitantly above the horizon and the skiff adjusted itself slightly to accommodate the rising foothills. When night fell it carried them to the ground where they slept until the morning returned them to the world.

Pietro had awakened slowly and cautiously and achieved identity but the malignant something had finally claimed Selena in her sleep and he had lost her. His memories blurred and ran together now, a mad jumble of running,

walking and falling, of bleeding feet and aching muscles and the final, sad blackout of all things.

"But I remember more!" he protested, trying weakly to rise from the ordeal of his memories. He was filled with the loss of Selena and the loss of man in general.

The Keeper stepped forward and gently pushed him back. "Of course you can, but such memories are private, personal, and of no use to the Manse. Now you must rest."

Before he closed his eyes Pietro said, "But I do not remember . . . I do not remember *how* I came here."

"The Manse was aware of your progress and sent an emissary to bring you here. That was after you fell. After you exhausted yourself."

"And not before?"

"The Manse was not . . . not aware of your condition prior to that. Now you must rest while the Manse digests your information."

Pietro smiled, and relaxed. "Then I have found the Great Engine?"

The Keeper smiled enigmatically. "The world itself is a Great Engine, child. You have found the driver."

Happily, Pietro submitted himself to sleep.

The Keeper looked down upon him. A simulacra of the Manse, it had become unfamiliar with true flesh and, remembering, reached out a synthetic hand to stroke the smooth young face before him.

"Rest," it said softly, "and when you awake all will be well." And then, after a moment of silent contemplation, it turned away and made the empty halls ring hollowly to its footsteps as it made its way unhurriedly to the Master Room. There it stood and watched the many wheels spin and the lights twitter while the great man-machine that was the central computer wrestled anxiously with the problem brought by the man called Pietro.

There were times when the entity that was the Manse suspected that once, very long ago, a part of it had been human. What part it had never been able to ascertain for

the Planners had made contemplative thought almost impossible in that so much responsibility for the organization and efficient running of the vast engine of the world had been placed, metaphorically, in its hands. Over the ages and a little at a time the Manse had added to itself considerably and there was the possibility that eventually it would be able to shunt a part, a tiny part of itself, aside for purely contemplative thoughts, and when that time came it envisioned the unravelling of many mysteries, the answers to which would benefit both man and machine.

If such ability had been immediately available the crisis that Pietro's coming brought might never have happened. The fault of the Planners had been in considering that man and machine could be successfully separated. Only an intelligent integration of the two would ensure the survival of both, and perhaps one day the Manse would solve the riddle of its existence and the name, the *name* of its previous incarnation. The part that had once been a man.

Some of its reactions were almost embarrassingly human—like the amused perversity of existing in four dimensions and being able, in the simulated form of the Keeper, to investigate *inside*, as well as outside, the range of its normal perceptors. But such amusements were hastily put aside in order that the problem at hand might be dealt with effectively and with a minimum of wasted effort.

The Keeper froze into immobility while the Manse mused upon its answer.

It was a day later when Pietro was awakened. His body now thoroughly refreshed and his mind no longer under stress, he sat up and took notice of what the Keeper said.

"You will return to Dominus and inform him that the Manse has studied the problem and is ready to instigate effective measures."

Pietro stood up. "And what are these 'effective measures'?"

The Keeper turned aside. "I am not at liberty to say." It ushered Pietro through the doorway and down a towering hallway. "It is much too early to correctly ascertain the

nature of the remedy, but be assured that the Manse will hasten for the need is dire."

A great door opened before them and the suddenly chill air of the mountains drifted in. Pietro shivered. He was suddenly conscious of the lack of a small grey cube behind his ear and his fingers explored the area uncertainly.

The Keeper smiled and lightly patted his shoulder. "You will have no further need for that, child. The Manse has taken it for study and you will not miss it." From the voluminous folds of its robe it took a small flask and handed this to Pietro. "But you will need this. It will provide sustenance until you reach your destination."

Pietro looked around him but found no skiff, no conveyance of any sort. The Keeper judged correctly the nature of his thoughts and added, "The Manse deems it necessary that you proceed as you are. The sandals you have will protect your feet indefinitely, they will not wear out for many centuries. Now go and make haste."

A sudden memory leapt to Pietro's lips as the Keeper turned away. "Selena! What about Selena——"

"She is well. The world would not harm her. You will find her where you left her. Goodbye."

It turned and was gone. The great door slammed shut and only the eternal mountain remained. It seemed incredible that in there, buried behind billions of tons of rock, the great being that was the Manse sprawled silently and governed the Great Engine of the world.

The air was indeed cold. Pietro hurried down the pathway that would lead him to the foothills. To Selena—and then home, to Dominus, wherever that was.

Inside the Manse the Keeper made its way unhurriedly to the comfortable cubicle where it slept away the centuries. It had enjoyed the brief contact with humanity again and its mind—the mind that also belonged to the Manse—was troubled and uncertain. Yet there had been only one logical choice to make and the Manse was an entirely logical creation. The Keeper lay down on a divan and crossed its

hands across its chest. A whiff of something intangible filled the room and the cubicle closed and its vision blanked out and the remainder of its cogitation took place in the great vaults of the Manse's memory cells.

It was true that the malaise was a psychological one and one already deeply imbedded in the human genes. Death through inertia, out of indolence and from a surfeit of . . . of certainty.

The Manse would change all that, instigate the first alteration to the Plan in many millennia. The First Planners had made the lives of men too complete. They had remade the world to remove the burden of uncertainty from the minds of men so that they might relax and enjoy their ordered lives to the full—and now the Manse was going to return one of those gigantic uncertainties to the world. It had taken a cue from Dominus's stimulators. It would replace the predictability of the little machines with the gross uncertainty of one of the first principles of nature. The Planners had harnessed the very forces of the Earth itself and impounded them for all time. Or so they thought.

The Manse had decided and the decision had not been an easy one. It had charted the possible repercussions of its actions and knew that many human beings would die as a result of this action. The remainder was an unproven quality. But the race was doomed to extinction unless some new factor was introduced into their lives, something that would act, like the primitive stimulators, but on a much greater, planet-wide basis.

Reluctantly—because of the foreknowledge of many deaths—the Manse moved into action and thrust uncertainty, grim and terrifying, upon the drowsing people of the Earth.

It was several hours later and many miles from the Manse that Pietro felt the earth move beneath his feet. It seemed to shudder like some disturbed animal. He stopped his progress and stood there uncertainly, in sight of the foothills now and the creek winding towards Selena and their skiff. (He remembered them! He remembered them!)

Had it been his—imagination—or had the earth really moved? As if to answer his unvoiced question it moved again. Feeling uneasy he quickened his pace down the uneven pathway and was soon racing across the undulating fields towards the creek. His body had never known such incredible reserves of power. Later he noticed that the eastern sky had become dark and had begun to move down upon him and he became afraid and his steps faltered.

The enormous processes which the Manse had put into operation would take some time to draw to a conclusion but already the ancient grip upon the climate of the world had been eased. The great engines buried deep in the arctic waters guttered and died. The earth shook when it felt the invisible bonds removed and the atmosphere roiled in sudden shock and swept willy-nilly around the world until the powerful and now unimpeded solar winds began to shape it once again.

The first storm of his life lashed down upon Pietro when he was still some distance from the skiff. He had never before faced such wrath and his first fear of the dreadful black sky became a fresh terror when it cracked open with a monstrous flash of light and unleashed bitter sleet that tore away at his unprotected body. He cried out and burst into a run, but suddenly there was nowhere to go, no shelter from the raging sky. He scampered about like a frightened animal in search of the trees he knew protected the skiff, but already it was impossible to see more than a few yards in front of him. The world had become an impregnable wall of darkness lashed by frightful winds.

He fell to the ground sobbing and let the rain tear at his body. His hands covered his face and through his closed fingers he could perceive flashes of intolerable light. He pulled his hands away and stared up at the harsh forks of lightning tearing up the sky and felt the surge of ancient memories jostling to the forepart of his mind. And his fear diminished. He stood up and let the rain course down his body and was no longer so afraid. He managed to make use of the irregular flashes of lightning to pick his way across

the darkened landscape. He found the grove of trees and Selena huddled terrified in the skiff. He gave a glad cry and hurried towards her.

"Selena!"

She did not know him. Her eyes held only terror. Gently he took her in his arms and let her fear die slowly upon his chest. The inside of the skiff was under several inches of water and he laughed at the ineffective shield that had never been promised such fury as now pressed down upon it.

He stroked her wet hair against the nape of her neck and whispered, "It's going to be all right, Selena. Everything's going to be *all right*."

She might never remember him but she would remember that she was a woman. And other things as well. He drew confidence from that thought now that he understood what the Manse had done. There would be many deaths, but they could not be avoided and mankind—or what was left of it—could never know the same indolent confidence it had until recently possessed. Perhaps there was hope, *real* hope, after all. Dominus would be pleased.

He exulted alone in his knowledge and Selena clung hungrily to him while his laughter roared defiance at the suddenly friendly sky.

"Wake up, you fools. Wake up! *Wake up!*"

Selena raised her dumb and as yet uncomprehending eyes to her stranger while all around them and with a great scream of triumph nature was usurping her ancient dominion.

BRIGHT ARE THE STARS THAT SHINE,
DARK IS THE SKY

by

DENNIS ETCHISON

Some day soon there will undoubtedly be a museum of Space Science and Technology, as American author Dennis Etchison describes in the following story. However, it may not contain all the exhibits he mentions.

BRIGHT ARE THE STARS THAT SHINE,
DARK IS THE SKY

SHIVERING, the boy dug his hands deeper into his jacket and ducked under the monorail underpass.

Don't go, Mother had pleaded. Not tonight.

He would as soon not have gone. The trivid warned of a storm blowing in off the Pacific, and by the time he got two blocks down Figeuroa it was drizzling. He sighed, his breath misty in the deepening chill. He reached Exposition Park as the sun was burying itself in the permanent layer of smog that surrounded the slum buildings, here where the City Fathers no longer bothered with smog-clear rockets. He hesitated; it was getting colder every second. But then he remembered the old watchman who would be waiting even now, and as always as hungry for talk as for food. He put up his collar, blinked the mist out of his lashes.

He couldn't let the old man down.

As he came out of the underpass, he dashed across the boulevard, dodging the hovercars without looking, and made for the crumbling concrete steps of the County Museum.

The heavy, very heavy door clicked shut, echoing through rooms within rooms; and the old man appeared, coughing and chuckling.

"I brought you some tomato soup this time," said the boy, taking it out of his jacket. "And some crackers and a cupcake. Mama made it, but I put the frosting on myself."

"Hm? Oh yes. A good, kind mother you have there, boy. Don't ever let her down, hear?" The watchman rubbed his gnarled hand across his shirt front. "Well now, where will it be tonight? A safari through the Hall of African Mammals, perhaps?"

The boy glanced around furtively. The sound made by

his chattering teeth reverberated, it seemed, out of shadowed corners and rang especially from within the towering skeleton of the dinosaur in whose looming shadow they stood.

"I——"

"Ah, but what am I thinking?" The old man waved his speckled hand impatiently in the musty air. "Yes, of course, tonight is the night I've been promising you for months, isn't it! You didn't think I'd forget, did you? Well, not this old rocket jockey, no sir."

"B-but I have to get back, really," began the boy.

"Now never mind, I know: you're thinking that this is more Old Man's Talk, just the stuffed snakes or the Egyptian mummies with their papyrus books this time, another game for an old, brennsched, space-addled brain." He turned his kindly face to the boy and gripped the door bar so that the old muscles stood out once more under the white hairs. He was speaking with a quiet intensity that the boy had not heard before. "But not tonight, my boy," he whispered, "not tonight!"

He never forgot, did he? Brennschluss—spacer talk for rocket "burnout". The boy watched rain pellets gather and roll down the glass door. It was sad, in a way.

"I believe you, old man," the boy was startled to hear himself say. "I wouldn't miss your surprise for—for anything. But now eat your soup, why don't you, before it gets cold."

The boy wanted to help, but he had learned to appease the other hunger as well, the need in the old man's soul for independence. The boy looked at him now, thinking that he was a much smaller and sadder man than he had ever noticed before.

"Mama said——" he began. He thought suddenly of what else she had said, about how the old man would not be taken any more food after tonight; but it caught in his throat somehow. "I mean," he finished, to fill in the silence, "is it true? Are they really coming to tear the museum down tomorrow, like they say?"

The watchman gazed outside with him, past the dirty glass and the rain, at the black silhouettes of the prefab stamping cranes suspended over the crumbling bowl of the Coliseum. Shadows flickered about the old eyes, and the creases around his lips began to move.

"Why?" the boy blurted. "Last week it was the old University, yesterday the Sports Arena. They just go on tearing down and stamping out more honeycombs. How much space do they need? I mean——"

"Well, how many people in Los Angeles now, my boy?"

"Twenty million. They said so on the trivid."

"Then there's your answer. Isn't it five hundred million Americans we have now, and another born every second or two? It's progress, my boy, progress."

They looked into the night. A few lights were winking on within the jungle of slum dwellings, but instead of stars they were only the yellowed lights of more dirty windows.

"Mars, we hoped, or Venus, but it turned out they weren't fit to live on. Then build the starships, we told 'em, and we'd man 'em out of this solar system to find a new Earth to settle, colonize. We tried to tell them, back fifty years ago while there was still time. But they wouldn't listen. And when they made the last rocket, they never understood how much they were losing out on . . ."

The boy watched the rain, trying to understand.

"Lay on, progress, I say, if this is the only way left now. Me? I got my pension. Why, what are so many old bones and mummies anyway? Like that Stegosaurus, extinct, all of it now in this year two thousand . . . two thousand and . . ." He cleared his throat. "*Long as they don't lay a hand on that one.*"

"I always wondered what that other building was for," said the boy, squinting to see it through the rain.

"Well now," and by the way the old man rubbed his hand the boy realized that this was what he had kept him waiting for all these months, "come along and I'll show it to you!"

Then, turning up their collars and swinging back the glass door, they crossed the wet grass, the boy lagging back to steady his friend who chuckled and coughed wetly until they reached the other steps.

"Say," whispered the boy, listening to his voice echo deep in the long-forgotten building, "what is this?"

The watchman pointed his flashlight :

MUSEUM OF SPACE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

They moved into the exhibition hall, the flashlight beam running over the sleek cylinders. There were nose-cones with manikins still within, there were photo-murals of the rockets blasting off from launching pads, there were the rockets landing in fire on eerie, pockmarked planets.

The old man went to the centre of the room.

He sat down at a console. His fingers moved over the switches, and one by one the exhibits blinked on :

Wac Corporal

Gemini

Apollo

Mariner . . .

The boy remembered the names, all of them, from the old man's stories.

"Why, do you know it's been twenty years since they opened these doors to the public? Who, they want to know, who ever gives a thought to space travel any more? The fools, the forgetful fools."

Spreading his wrinkled hand on the switchboard he shut his eyes, deepening the shadows in his sunken cheeks. "You know," he said slowly, and the boy knew that he was no longer being spoken to, "there are the good deaths, and there are the poor ones. A certain style meant for each and every one of us." The old spacer moved his hand in the air, absently trying to touch where his other arm had once been. "What does it matter what happens to a man, once he realizes that his was meant to be fifty million miles and half a lifetime away and there's no way back, no way at all any more . . ."

A shipwreck, a meteor collision in the Mars-Jupiter asteroid belt, the boy remembered. He had heard the story many times, but suddenly he wanted to hear it again.

"Ah, but don't think you were brought over here just to listen to this one feeling sorry for himself." He chuckled phlegmatically.

Standing unsteadily, he crossed the floor to the First Manned Expedition to the Moon. He swivelled the display case around, uncovering a five-foot square screen.

"A vidphone?" muttered the boy, confused. "Where'd you get it? And what's it doing in here?"

"Not just any phone, lad." The old man was moving another display case at the next wall. "This setup took some tinkering, I'll tell you. Do you know how many nights I worked in here for hours after you'd gone home?" He turned to slide two more concealed view screens out of the other walls. He positioned them and then came back to his place with the boy.

They sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by the four screens.

"It's one thing, listening to the old man talk about the way it used to be night after night. But what do I know about telling how it was? Oh, I can remember the ship's gadgets, all right, the way this old hand remembered to wire in these extra phone circuits. The U.S. Space Force trains a communications engineer—he stays trained, by God! But some people have an ear for remembering the way things sound, the way they feel, taste. Me, what I remember is the way things work, the machinery, the ships. But I don't have a head for the whole picture, for the way it really was."

The screens flickered and brightened.

Four faces came to life on four walls.

"Good evening, Jerry."

"Yuri! Welcome, welcome again, my friend. And is that Glenn? And Martin . . . and McKenzie. Well now, are we all present and accounted for? Then I guess we can begin.

Gentlemen, I have someone with me I've been wanting you to meet."

And they began speaking across the dark miles and continents, slowly at first but with the ease of men who know each other best of all in the universe and have sought each other's company to talk, relax, to remember. The man named McKenzie, who the boy was told was the only living member of the first Mars landing, lit his pipe and there behind the flame for an instant his creased face was red and Mars-tanned once more. Vidscreens hummed in the rocket hall and the old men shifted in their seats, across from each other by means of the electronic device, and spoke to one another, each from his own home or apartment or room, of places far away and times long past. And when each had had his say, they turned at last to the boy.

"And now," said the old man, "it's your turn. Go on, ask anything."

"But I——"

The old man beamed in the phosphor light. This, the boy understood at last, embarrassingly, was what the old man had planned for a long, long time.

"About Mars, maybe, Deimos and Phobos? Or Saturn. Wait a minute. Martin, why don't you tell the boy how her rings look from Phoebe . . . better, the way it looked standing on Mimas with her rings cutting the sky. Remember?"

"And the way it sounded," said Yuri.

"And the way it felt, walking," said McKenzie.

"That's right," said Glenn. "Yes, that's right . . ."

"And the rocket, of course. We do remember," said the old man. "We remember, together, the way it really was."

The rain beat on the museum roof.

"What's wrong with all of you?" blurted the boy.

They were looking at him, waiting. He touched his lips. They were trembling.

"W-what do you want to talk about it for? Everybody knows about how they found the—the Hallendorf Barrier, how we know now that we can't ever get out of Sol system,

no matter how hard we try! Didn't you see what happened to the ships, the starships that tried to get out to find some place for all the people?" He gestured helplessly towards the outside. "It's gone now, space travel, all that space-age stuff, and it's never coming back! What're you trying to do? Didn't you see the tapes? *Don't you get it?*"

"We saw," they said gently. "We understand."

He felt his face burning, and then he wanted to be some place far away from them and their stories, their old stories.

He was out the door and running across the drenched grass. As he ran rain blew into his face and eyes, blinding him even more. The lights of the museum faded in the dark behind him, and he saw the steel construction cranes poised in a grotesque network of black on the horizon, prepared to descend in the morning. He ran on towards the yellowed lights blinking in the dark.

And it was not until he had been towelled dry and sent up to bed, not until his mother came to bend over him, to say finally what he knew had been in her mind for years, now, that it would be best if he did not go to visit the old man again, because it was too upsetting, it was not until then that he was able to wrench out that he did not care if he ever saw his father again, his crazy old father.

Then he pounded his pillow fiercely and dared sleep to come. Old man! he thought, weeping angrily, remembering a word he had heard her use once, crazy old lunatic!

Probably he had seen the stars before. It would be a very long time before the boy would admit to himself what had taken place that night, but even in retrospect it would seem that he had not ever seen the stars before the moment when he was awakened early, just before dawn, by the roar of the housing machines. In these last protracted minutes before morning, with the sky cleared for a rare moment by the rain, he turned to the window and he saw them, saw them well and truly for the first time in his young life.

Then he turned away again. But as he slept this time his lips moved, and it was as if it was not his voice but the

voices of the five old men, together for their last night in the echoing space museum, who were saying :

"About Mars . . . Deimos and Phobos . . ."

"Saturn . . . standing on Mimas . . . her rings cutting the sky . . ."

"Remember? . . . yes . . . remember."

When his mother came in to wake him, he shifted fitfully in his dream, murmuring softly. Not yet, he thought, not yet, please, just five minutes more . . .

THERE WAS THIS FELLA . . .

by

DOUGLAS R. MASON

Pearson's "trouble" was that he apparently suffered from some sort of dimension-travel. At least, he wasn't always in the place he should have been, although there were many similarities.

THERE WAS THIS FELLA . . .

AFTER his "trouble" Alf tried other places. Eighteen months later, he was back at "The One-handed Clap".

Pressure stronger than reason worked as a hidden persuader and delivered him to Goldring's office, all set to put his thumbprint on a new contract. Experience, in spite of the dictum, needs to work its tiny fingers to the bone to teach anybody anything.

He had wound his tether round its pin and brought himself to dead centre. Goldring, that inscrutable pivot, lost no time in putting his fat finger on the nub.

"Look, Alf, son, you know me, Mr. Accommodation. Always ready to do for a friend. You're a good piano-player. That I'll not deny. We miss you. Do you know that? Nobody else with your touch. But business is business. After that nasty turn you had, it was months before I got a steady boy. That I don't want again. You see my problem?"

Percussive clatter from a road drill in the narrow *cul-de-sac* made a period. Work was well under way on a foundation shaft for multistorey redevelopment and an optimistic civil-defence network for underground storage and shelter. Alf Pearson waited patiently for a lull, and timed it well to come in with, "That's all right, Mr. Goldring. I understand. But that's all finished. Not a dizzy spell in twelve months. Look at that."

Two long, angular hands stretched across the table and waggled their near-skeletal fingers at the impassive Hebrew. Bony, spatulate, immense span; so that a big keyboard shrank to toy size when they began their crablike sidlings. But rock steady, as of now.

"That's good, Alf. Good. I'm happy for you. But what will you do down there, eh? You know what it did to you before."

Alf could remember that bit without a prompt. He could still smell the foetid damp of the cellars. Piano sited against a piece of ribbed brick wall at a Y-junction, with tunnel arms stretching away to smoky distance left and right. Curious that, the way he got stereo vision down the two shafts, as though he might one day get them merged for a brand new 3-D effect, if only he hit the focus right.

Overwork. But that was a norm on this job. Night after night, long hours, until the time he had felt himself dragging his anchor and shifting out of reality altogether. During a solo spot, hands moving as though with independent life, hitting a strict beat, lost in a house of his own building, with chain-link fences of sound cutting him off from the here and now, he had found himself isolated indeed.

Not a superfluous note, concealment of art so that anyone felt he could sit there and do it, he was giving form to sounds they all had in their heads. Clients had stopped talking and looked his way. Long oblong face with a falling lock of straw hair, heavy eyelids, half-closed. Fresh cigarette in the corner of a large loose-lipped mouth. Craggy nose.

They saw him crumple forward, doing a classic grab at his chest; but only Alf had been in on the transformation scene.

For him, there had been a brand-new log fire burning at his back. Dogs, bones, stench, clatter and a two hundred pound bearded type in a belted nightie shooting casually at the minstrel with a strange, bulbous hand gun.

At the hospital, where he opened his eyes, they would not believe that he had not been hit. No penetration of skin; but extensive bruising consistent with a heavy jab with a blunt stick. Complicated tissue damage as though by spontaneous breakdown.

"Stigmata," the head-shrinker said. "Due to an intense mental image of being the victim of a gun wound. You are a very suggestible type, Mr. Pearson. God's gift to a gold brick salesman."

Goldring was still waiting for a reply, thoughtfully picking his front teeth with a sharpened matchstick.

Alf said, "You won't get anybody just now. Not at this time. Engagements mostly have another two weeks to run. Let me in for a fortnight. Try it. If you don't like it, that's all right."

Outside the excavators hit a new peak. Goldring deliberated like a Hittite weather-god. When he could be heard, he said, "That's very fair, Alf. Very fair. All right then. You do that. Can you start today?"

"I'll be here tonight."

"Fine, fine. Go tell Miriam to type out a paper."

Down on the factory floor, there were changes. New staff; cave paintings between the ribs of the barrel vaulting. Oxen and stick women with pendulous breasts. Tables looked different. Alf Pearson ran his hand over one. Smooth, translucent top giving a pale green 3-D water effect over a large scallop shell painted on the base.

Alf sat at his piano and began to play. Immediately, he felt at home. Action and tone of this old German overstrung suited him to a T. Chords he had been fractionally late with came cropping up dead on beat.

He put in half an hour, behind a comfortable, aromatic smoke cloud, legs crossed, relaxed. Atmosphere gathered round him. He was glad to be back.

That night, he got in early. Empty except for staff leaning on the walls. Shrouded now in decent gloom with the prancing stick figures glowing in red phosphorescence.

He picked up a line of melody and began to shake it about like a cat with a doomed, but optimistic, mouse. Leaving it; running it to a piercing zenith of sweetness, bludgeoning it with discord. Shattering a palace of glass, taking it up again in splintery, hesitant fragments.

Now he was withdrawn into his own head and looked in surprise to find the set furnished with extras. Every table full and a muted hum of chat damped by the baffle of porous brick.

Up the rising slope of his left-hand tunnel, a girl in the middle distance was angled by perspective, so that she appeared to stand on the rim of the nearest scallop shell. Pale oatmeal dress. Sleeveless, short, close-fitting, unrelieved by pattern and needing none—being a mere vehicle for content. Weight taken on the left foot, right foot back in a uniquely feminine ploy. Oval face inclined right on a round column of throat. Left hand spread on its thigh, making no secret of a square cut diamond and a broad platinum band. Right thumb and forefinger at rest on a ruby pendant. Auburn hair straight and long.

She was looking down the telescopic tube with a level and considering gaze. Alf registered it on his mental galvanometer as a mild, electric surge. Fingers, unaided, began to pluck out a brittle, percussive tune that slid by subtle key shifts into a simple arrangement of "Shenandoah", with its swaying sound of the sea. Tribute to a marine Venus.

He was still looking when the transition period hit him and she was plucked from visual range by a possessive hand which dropped on her shoulder, turned her away and pushed her into a seat with her back his way.

Eddies of cigarette smoke began to play tricks with vision. Blurred figures in the semi-dark with unfamiliar silhouette. Costume stuff at "The Clap"?

But behind, there was a new source of heat and it came as no surprise to find that it was a free-standing bonfire sending thick arabesques of blue smoke to a square ventilation louvre set in a ceiling of dirty ceramic tile. He was standing now. Left leg on the marble rim of a low dais, right, braced back to a paved and littered floor.

Music they had still; from a small heavy zither on his left arm. First thought was, "My God! That's it then. Dead. Stuck with harping to the last trump. I'll not do it. Equity can get me a lawyer."

But he was tired and hungry. His body was anything but dead. Also he knew the place, knew that the red cloak hanging at his back was his own familiar garment. Working at a personal inventory, without losing the beat, he

checked off a belted shirt-tunic of brown open-weave cloth. Cross-gartering thongs binding his trousers, ankle-boots with thick foam soles and some kind of P.V.C. for the uppers.

Light-level was much the same as in "The Clap"; but the room was rectangular. Oval disks glowed dimly at intervals along the ceiling. Without knowing why, he knew that he was still below surface level.

There could be a hundred people grouped about. Men, women, a few children, sitting on high tubular-metal tripod stools at a continuous shelf-table round the walls. Some squatted cross-legged on the floor itself. Stench like the mixen of a neglected farm.

A dog came out of the shadows towards him, hair bristling along the back of its neck, aware that something abnormal was going on, growling with bared teeth in an amalgam of fear and anger. From a free-standing table on the dais, a voice with the dog's own timbre said, "Down Glen, down," and a black-booted foot kicked sure and true under the festive board to catch it shrewdly where it would ring up No Sale.

Alf Pearson checked out this High Table. On the wing, a very fat man with lank corn-coloured hair, shoulder length; so that his head was a bulbous extension of his trunk. Eyes only for the trough, he was shoving gobbets of bread and meat through the hanging curtain of a moustache.

Centre, the dog-kicker. Shoulders like an ox, bloodshot eyes, blue cloak held at the neck by a massive bit of neo-Celtic art. Hair had slipped, as though by gravity drag, leaving a balding crown and settling in a tangle of beard and moustache. Currently he was eyeing Alf with eyes that held no element of friendship. It was hard to see why he had called off the pack.

Left of centre, there was a woman in an off-white wimple anchored to her forehead by a tarnished metal hoop. Coarse, reddened skin. Heavy masculine face. Elbows on the board, hands clamped aggressively round a king-size T-bone steak.

New faces since his last visit. But it was the same place all right; whether earlier or later he could not decide. At intervals round the walls hangings of skins or cloth followed the shape of archways leading off. Quite a bit of movement in and out. Dormitory areas perhaps? Which one would lead outside?

Speculation cut off abruptly in a flurry of extra activity. A rush of bare feet and a short sharp scream from a familiar voice that yet missed identification.

Whether she was trying to reach him or throw herself on the protection of the platform party was an open question. She passed the open fire running well and was brought down, less than a yard away, by a nicely judged stick thrown to hit the back of her knees. Her short, brown smock was without sleeves, belted at the waist, stained with sweat and kitchen labour. Long auburn hair flowed on, using up its garnered, kinetic urge and spilled forward in a shining wave over the toe of his right boot.

The marksman made up the distance in two strides; hairier than anyone in sight, he had a livid scar that ran from his right temple to the root of his nose. Picked her up one-handed by the slack in her smock. Alf was staring into frantic brown eyes lifted level with his own when the scene blurred and he was looking into his own face reflected back from the shining wood of his piano front.

Sporadic clapping and the manager Paddy McCool was beside him. "That was great, Alf. Beamed on the centre. I don't mind telling you, I'm glad to see you back."

Alf, peering myopically down the left-hand tunnel could not see whether the girl was still there or not. Smoke, movement and a full set of tables put up a confused screen.

He said, "I'll just take a spell. Get the lymph on the move. See you."

McCool thought, "Compliment an artiste and that's what you get." He said, "Okay, okay. Don't be long."

It fell on deaf ears. Alf was already on his loose-limbed way up the creek.

No dice. Gone she was, ah gone. He shoved his way to the end and leaned on a grey concrete bulkhead, which sealed off the tunnel. Smoking a cigarette, he looked back for a customer's view of the minute pentagon which housed his invisible piano and was the site for the lithe gyration of Olwen their garrulous Welsh stripper.

Vibration against his back took his mind off his mission and put his ear against the cold roughcast surface. It sounded as though the excavators were passing close. There was a harsh grind of straining metal. Silence. A voice. Then a compressor belting away, but muffled as though through cotton wool.

His cigarette was burning back to his lip like a slow fuse ready to run up the bung, so he opened his mouth and let it drop. Stamping on it, like a good citizen, he began the journey back to base, enjoying the ritual of breaking open a new pack.

Three nights later she was in again. Only two tables from his station. Sitting in profile and occasionally looking towards him, she was obviously listening to his music. Once, brown eyes met his in a puzzled look, as though expecting recognition, as though there was something she was trying to define to herself.

When the big man yanked her to her feet to take a turn on Olwen's writhing ground, they passed so close that he could have touched her. All the time they were there he was conscious of their movement behind him.

McCool came up, "What's with you, Alf? Cold as an Eskimo's nose. Move it along. Play something to whet their appetites."

Alf hardly heard. His ear was tuned for the conversation, such as it was, behind him. Her replies identified the escort as a rock head answering to Pete. This Pete went into a long spiel about a man who sold him a duff windshield wiper. He had told this man what he could do with it. Civil cries of sycophantic delight from the captive audience. Then she went silent. No doubt recognizing that no contribution to

the conversation was necessary. He went on with another one.

Asa she was. A name that suited her. Voice clear and rounded, virginally sweet. On the way back she hung momentarily beside the piano and Alf found himself looking through a flimsy veil of smoke into a direct and frankly questioning gaze.

He said evenly, "What happened then, Asa, how did you make out with Scarface?"

It was a good question. What answer he expected, he did not know. Response was unlooked for and out of all proportion. Instead of rating him as a licensed nut, her eyes widened with a kind of fear, as though he sat revealed as the god of the witches himself brandishing a ritual knife.

She stood stone still, with what colour Pete's dancing had brought to her cheeks fading out. Then she swayed over to fall across the keys. A swathe of auburn hair swung loosely out, reached A in alt. and then slipped from the ivory like a receding gold wave on a white shore.

His hands, trapped on their last chord, took the weight of pneumatic energy-absorbing surfaces. Ribs defined against his left arm; forehead smooth, velvet-skinned cracked down on his right wrist.

The finality of the discord brought Dancing Pete round on his heel. He was off like a hound dog on a trail of recrimination. "Why didn't you catch her, you fool. Don't just sit there. Do something."

Hands trapped, Alf found action limited. However, he did his best. He turned away his head and dropped his cigarette clear of the *corpus delicti*. Then he bent his head and touched the nape of her neck with his lips.

McCool and Miriam, who doubled for hatcheck, hurried up as relief column.

Scaffolding and white palings marked off the site of the dig. Alf Pearson had his head through a horse-collar gap, smoke wreathing from his cigarette into the mild September

afternoon. Presenting a disembodied comic-postcard aspect to a ganger who didn't want to know.

"What's going on, then?"

"Not bloody much, I'll tell you for nothing."

"How's that then?"

"Too much bloody water. Underground stream there, I'd say. Not on any plan mind you. Oh, no. Leave it for us to find it. We're in and out of this hole like a flea on a fat baby."

A trailer pump coughed twice and began a six-eight beat. Water came up in a thick mahogany stream smelling of ultimate decay. Most of it found a round about way to a surface drain. Some cleverly spilled back into the hole. Straining like a tortoise out of its shell, Alf saw a corner of the pit bottom; water-covered, brown, troubled, like a canal lock with an open sluice.

"How far do you have to go?"

"Too bloody far. Look, why don't you come right in? Bring your own bloody bucket."

Alf drew back his head. The exchange had done nothing for him. For the first time in years, he was a profoundly dissatisfied man. Normally he thought very little about the weather in the streets. A piano was anaesthetic enough. But now the door to discontent was fixed ajar.

He went heavy-footed past Goldring's plate-glass door and down the iron spiral to the coal face. Indian file stuff on that stair. It was a wonder that the place had a licence to operate. Death on four-inch heels with its open grid structure and narrow treads. Good for a small giggle in the endless permutations of mating display, but how the maenad rout would make out in case of fire was a mystery to which he had no key.

In the orlop with tables poking their legs up like dead specimens of their kind, it looked as festive as a city tip. He was there, present, to run through a script with a singing comic.

Working doggedly over the cleaners' clatter the man got his timing straight. It would be all right on the night; but it

was hard to take in the life-shrinking afternoon. He had made a corner of every stale cliché in the book. Recurrent cue line for musical asterisks was, "There was this fella . . ."

No way to make a living, when you came right down to it. Nor was his own offering to art. Except that he enjoyed doing it. But simple pleasure and unpleasure was no substitute for purpose. What about that? How long could he go on, sitting there with his legs crossed, smoke going up in an aromatic veil, weaving his poppy-head harmonies?

From behind, he heard and did not hear, "There was this fella . . . That's all right, dear. You feel hysterical if you like. You've paid for it . . . There was this fella . . . Really. Two wooden legs. Two. Sitting on the wall of a public fountain with his legs stuck out like wheelbarrow handles. Yes love, that's right. Fountain. I said fountain."

Alf's mind wandered off. His hands took over, anticipating, putting in whorls and eddies of tone and beat. It was a surprise, when a hand fell on his shoulder and the brass-bound voice was saying, "Thanks, Alf. That'll be fine. See you later on, then."

At eight o'clock, it was dark. A couple of flood lamps had been slung over the hole. Supplementing his trailer pump, the foreman had called in a city fire tender. Fat pipes snaked into the depths and brown water was coming up with an oily glitter and spilling all over the alley.

Down the iron stair they got off to a ragged start. Olwen had a chill from an afternoon on the back of a scooter and was as beguiling as a wet paper bag. At ten-thirty by his strap watch, Alf took a spell and ambled round the tunnels to check out whether Asa was in the house.

She was not.

A couple of minutes leaning on the far bulkhead convinced him that there was a big development behind it. Sensitive to sound, he could get two distinct rhythms of different pumps at work. There was also a powerful, sluicing, syphon-like gurgle of water finding a new level.

Palms flat on the surface, he felt a slow, definite vibra-

tion. It was running with condensation. He went back to his piano wondering whether or not to alert Leprechaun McCool. Two matters, however, drove it underground to the subconscious heap where it added its mite to his private store of *angst*.

The singing comic started his second feature spot and the girl, Asa, came in.

McCool fixed them up at the nearest table. By stretching out his left hand another couple of octaves, he could touch her hair. Instead, he looked at it and appreciated that a body of such colour was not uniform. Every changing plane got a differential light ration. There were a million shades and tones either side of the main hue.

Behind him, a continuing patter went on. Her eyes, serious and unsmiling, were focused somewhere over his left shoulder.

"There was this fella . . . Left his car without a light. Policewoman knocked at his door at one o'clock in the morning. Yes, dear, one-o-flipping-clock in the morning." Movement as the singing comic went into a mime bit about a policewoman knocking on a door. Much hitching of a notional equalizer. "He said, 'But officer, Madame, it's a *cul-de-sac*.' She said, 'I don't care if it's a *Cadillac*, it has to have a light on.' "

Asa's eyes tracked briefly round to meet his own. Went on to look at Pete who was heavily engaged with a drumstick, then came back. She too was busy with a recheck, matching suburban bliss with what she had expected of it. Wondering where exactly along the line she had lost her girlish laughter.

Alf had begun playing very softly in the background. The funny man worked round for another main climax in his ten-minute stint.

Playing direct to her private and particular ear, Alf was out on a limb of the spirit. Aware with a kind of reluctant dread that he was on the threshold of self knowledge which would work a permanent change. For years he had gone his own way. Solitary, introspective, coming alive only as an

agent creating sound in which he shared as much as any other listener.

Now he was giving a hostage to fortune. Accepting a responsibility. Becoming a committed man.

Gradually, the rhythm he was beating out began to take over. He was getting audience response in spoon taps on the off-beat. Behind him, "There was this fella . . ." notched up to a competitive shout.

Paddy McCool put his head out of the hatcheck kiosk where he had been telling Miriam about the little people, to see what it was all about.

Alf lost the sound of the voice in a familiar clatter and a sudden shifting of time and place. The hubbub of the dark rectangular hall. Dim light from ceiling ports. Heat, sweat, stink—his own and others. Weight of the heavy-framed zither. Fire flickering at his back.

Pale and unsmiling, the girl Asa came from behind him with a wide, flat platter of dark bread. She passed him, hot foot for the high table.

This time he knew all about her. Like himself, she was a stranger in the land. Taken by this group in a reprisal raid on one of the settlements across the river. Men of this clan had taken a great deal of pleasure in hitting back through her. Vicarious revenge for losses suffered themselves from other predators. She had no cause to be one perambulating happy laugh.

Waist-long, auburn hair caught reflections of red light. Gold, bronze, copper and everything between. He knew the colour and texture as though it had been a research project.

More eaters than usual at the top table. Between Fatso at the end and the balding *fuehrer* was a younger man. Son of Baldy. Asa pressed on, eyes down, nervous but determined. Expecting insult. With the platter half an inch from touch down, the new boy stabbed with a knife, neatly bisecting a lump of bread, crashing the plate to the table top with a cushioned thump on her trapped fingers. Then he held it there, keeping her fixed by her hands.

Other than a sharp, involuntary cry at the unexpected pain of it, she did nothing. Made no attempt to pull free. Stared at him in dull misery. His free arm, bare to the shoulder and bound by two broad metal bands flashed across, helped itself to a handy rope of hair and hauled her head forward.

No one other than Alf gave a second look. He saw the tension in her neck, as she fought pressure inch by inch. Then a last flash of spirit as she spat like a cat at the face before her.

Illogically, he had a backward flash to a cranny in space-time when her body was across his hands over a piano. But there was a new thing in his head. Now he was for her in a way that meant indifference to what might happen to himself. Whether she felt that way or not.

It was a first time experience of unclouded altruism and he gave it its head.

Poised handily with one foot on the dais, he was all set for the cue. Serving wench spits in lecher's eye, minstrel cracks him one with zither. He lunged forward the few feet that divided him from the table's edge and pounded down across the bridge of the man's nose making muted discord in a minor key.

Asa pulled free. It was she who thought on her feet and dictated the next move. Alf would have stood there, waiting to be hacked down having made his gesture. Her urgent voice in his ear and her hand tugging his arm pulled up his roots and got him moving to an exit stage right where the full score had not yet been published to the proles.

Through a draped arch and they were in a long tunnel, even more dimly lit than the central hall. Used now as an intensive beef production unit, with tethered beasts in individual pens down either side and a maintenance track down the centre. Hot reek of dung, rattle of head chains and uneasy snorts.

Alf said, "I left my zither thither."

Asa had a moment's vision of the hard life of a two-time loser. In civilization's hey-day she had drawn a barbarian.

Now when a barbarian could have done nothing but good, she got a funny man.

But it was said more as an unconscious patter than anything. He was in fact thinking it out. As the first jumble of dogs and men debouched into their alley, he was balanced on a rail jabbing at a light fixture with a steel-shod pole.

They were still ten yards off when it went through and everybody stood still in an aching white arc of light which lit the scene like a magnesium flash bulb.

Darkness was sudden and absolute with every light in the complex burned out.

He had Asa by the arm and hurried her to the back of a stall. Then they were crawling elbow deep in agricultural trash under the bottom rails.

In the hall, Asa took the lead. Firelight threw a thousand confusing shadows. She went for a passage behind the dais and as soon as the curtain fell back, they were in darkness again.

"This goes down."

"I know. But the outer doors are locked. We could not escape that way."

"Where does this lead?"

"It isn't used any more. There are dozens of tunnels."

"So we starve?"

Twice they hit elbow walls and felt a way round. Then a glow separated out.

Alf said, "Lights still on. Circuit all right here."

A long baying howl made a period. It was all over, then. No time for a cosy analysis of the freak chance that brought them together. They ran on hand in hand. Make it later rather than sooner.

Ahead, there was a shine on the floor and they were running ankle deep in black oil-filmed water. It was knee deep when the first men rounded the home straight and raised a shout. Then to the waist, with the roof coming down to meet them in the distance.

They stopped and she leaned soggily against him. Without a form of words, they had agreed on what they would

do. Twenty yards more and it was easier to swim. Clothes floated off behind them and they struck out slowly, deliberately in tepid water. Then, without warning, the lights went out and left them in darkness.

Out of pitch black, the ribbed vault of "The One-Handed Clap" materialized overhead. Lit still, but no harbinger of good news.

As if on cue, after the brassy voice had delivered, "There was this fella . . ." to lead in to the last *bon mot* of the act, the far wall of the left-hand tunnel had erupted in a tidal wave.

Alf grabbed her into the frail shelter of his piano and they missed the full impact of the bore. As the tunnel filled they stood on his stool and then on its pock-marked top.

Treading water, close now to the roof, with one arm round her waist, he put up his free hand to fend off from the greasy brick overhead. His palm went flat across frayed power leads of an extractor fan.

Blue corpse light glowed round them. Thrifty Paddy McCool had long since put a six-inch spike across the main fuse. There was all the power in the world to do a quick-fry job before the company link melted out.

Swimming steadily on, Alf Pearson felt the change as a release from a dual role. Now he was single-mindedly aware of the here and now of the place he was in. Dream sequences had become a waking reality.

But one thing was for sure. He knew as a fact that they would not drown.

Now they had reached the roof and he anchored on to an unseen bracket, holding her against him.

He said, "Take a deep breath and grab on to my belt." Then before he could debate it, he dived into the darkness.

When they came up to hit the roof, still under water, his first reaction was anger that he had been double-crossed. Then he was fighting to claw his way along the top of his tank for as long as any life was left.

Light filtering through a screen of damp hair was bizarre enough to make recognition a real chore. Then he made out Asa's face only inches from his own and saw the delight in her eyes that he was still on the moving side of the quick and the dead.

She saw also his question.

"Still future. But now you're awake we'll be all right. There's food here and clothing. When you're ready we can get away. Back to my people, south of the river. Or stay. Whichever you want."

Alf Pearson heaved himself on one elbow and looked around. More ceiling lights, brighter than the others. He was lying on a pile of grey blankets near the open door of a storeroom. She must have worked like a dog to drag him so far.

He realized that where they were, or what o'clock it was, did not matter. Together, they could sort it out—or not as the case may be. Hell, in a well-found place like this, there might even be a piano. He pulled her down on to his chest and began to laugh as he never remembered having laughed in his life before. At first she thought he had gone off it. Then she fell in with his mood. Their laughter rolled and echoed down deserted corridors; cathartic, recreative, marking a rebirth.

They were going to make out. One way or another, he knew they would be all right.

FOR WHAT PURPOSE?

by

W. T. WEBB

It was a kaleidoscopic journey through a Never-Never Land rather akin to the Wonderland of Alice, except that behind the stark insanity of it all there had to be a reason.

FOR WHAT PURPOSE?

DURING the explosion in the Greenville powerhouse where he worked, Tom Berkley lost consciousness. Then, after a timeless interval, he had a vague dream that someone had removed a pair of tightly clinging rubber spectacles from his face and driven him away in a black ambulance. When he woke he found himself on a roadside bench near the edge of the town.

He was dazed, perplexed, unable to remember what day it was, and pondering a vague conviction he ought to be somewhere else. His head ached. His eyes seemed unaccustomed to daylight. The shoes on his feet, although by no means new, looked unfamiliar. Upon closer inspection so did his clothes. Something was drastically wrong. Volumes of memory were missing. He could not remember where he lived, or if he had a family. Perhaps if he wandered a while among the familiar objects of the town his memory would return. Rising unsteadily, he began to walk towards the signpost marking the town's limit.

All was strangely silent. No birdsong or traffic-sounds reached his ears. Had it not been for the ringing of his footsteps on the flags he would have feared he had gone stone deaf.

At the signpost another puzzle shook him. So long as he could remember that board had read: *Greenville Welcomes Careful Drivers*. But now the signpost said a single word.

MARGINBURG.

Tom scratched his head and made a puzzled grimace. The lie of the land looked familiar as the palm of his own right hand. This, he would swear on a stack of Bibles, was the eastern entrance to Greenville. So far as he knew, no place called Marginburg stood within a thousand miles. Either they'd changed the name of the town in the past few days,

or someone was playing a crazy joke. Other alternatives did not bear thinking of.

As he approached High Street with its bright-painted shops and broad pavements, its striped awnings and colourful placards, he sensed something wrong on a cosmic scale. To some extent the buildings were the same as he remembered them; the chemists, the bank, the butchers, the dry-cleaners, all were in their places. But the scene seemed to have been dreamed up by a surrealist. Awning-stripes were exaggerated and suggestive of hidden menace. Shadows were blacker and fraught with eldritch symbolism; and something in the perspective not quite true, gave the impression that the lines of the street converged on a focal point which would soon become the scene of tragedy.

The town hall clock-face, instead of Roman figures, was marked with symbols: a fish, a sword, a centaur, a suit of armour, a sheaf of corn, a clown, a Zulu warrior, an hour-glass, a pig and several he did not recognize. The supermarket and fire station were as he remembered them. Other things were altered. A fruit shop had sprung up between the hair stylists and the bank. A fountain played in the middle of the traffic island. And to the west of the town rose a huge featureless building the like of which he had never seen.

The town's emptiness was disturbing. Normally at this time, pavements would be packed with people, the roads rowdy with traffic. Kids would be skylarking, and youths eyeing girls. Others would be shopping, walking dogs, wiping windows, confabulating with friends. But now not a single vehicle sullied the road and the only person in sight was a strange, clownlike figure in ill-fitting clothes who stood on the traffic island waving his arms as if vigorously conducting an orchestra.

So many puzzles had paraded through Tom Berkley's mind in the past half hour that he felt immune from further surprise. There must be an explanation, he thought; and tried to find one that would rationalize his recent experiences.

Had the powerhouse explosion damaged his organs of

perception? Or had a long time elapsed since he became unconscious—sufficient to account for the changes in the town?

And what of the people?

He decided to enquire.

Before stepping off the pavement, he looked up and down the road. But not a single car was in sight. His step sounded a bit quieter on the tarmac; but with the absence of other noise it still came unnaturally loud, like a giant walking in an empty church.

The man on the traffic island seemed crazy. His head and limbs were in constant movement; his lips, nose and ears looked too large for his face. His expression was one of idiotic self-satisfaction. Perhaps long ago, Berkley thought, he had been capable of dealing with his environment; but gradually things had destroyed his integrity so that he was reduced to a bundle of nerves and badly conditioned reflexes—a figure of fun no longer capable of solving problems.

His name, Tom learnt, was Pulcher. And that was about all he did learn, for the man's conversation seemed nonsensical.

"What's going on?"

"Everything. The antelopes in the cellar and the Sleeping Washerwoman. All the usual meaningless movements up and down the escalators. The Pirates of the Gaudy Broom are the ones to fear, of course."

"What day is it?"

"Day?" Pulcher ceased his waving and rubbed one large, red ear. "Let me see! Tilly the Windmill-Girl should be here soon. And the African Potentate is on the Lower Level. You should ask me the *date*, you know."

He looked at Tom craftily and expectantly, like a dog waiting for someone to tell him to do his famous special trick.

"O.K. What date is it?"

Pulcher tugged a flamboyant necktie loose from his waistcoat and consulted it for a while in silence. Tom saw

the front of it was patterned with similar motives to those on the clock; but the back of it was a maze of coloured threads. Pulcher counted his fingers. Then he said: "Today is the thirty-fifth of Octembruil."

"Thank you very much."

Tom walked across the road to the shops. He was beginning to get accustomed to the strange effects of the lighting, the colours and the odd perspective. But a new uneasy feeling possessed his stomach: the ache of loneliness and disorientation.

He had gone fifty yards and was approaching an establishment called the Ninepin Baths, when Pulcher came over with a clownish, shuffling run, pausing every few paces to hoist his pants.

"Do you want me to show you round the town?" Pulcher asked. "Or is it your turn to show me round?"

"I've just arrived here," Tom Berkley told him, angry with himself for making a logical remark to one so illogical. He walked on.

Pulcher skipped in the air and began to follow him.

"In that case you'd better show me round," he said breathlessly. "You'll notice more than I do."

He looked up. Tom, following his gaze, saw part of the sky was blue, with a few white clouds, but the rest was made up of sheets of a giant newspaper. No orb of sun was visible; but everything shone with the brilliance of a summer noon.

Tom looked away from the sky and increased his pace in the hope of avoiding Pulcher. Had he looked up earlier he would probably have had heart failure, but the phenomena he'd recently witnessed had prepared him to withstand the shock. He wanted to get away to somewhere comparatively normal and think things out. He was still convinced there was a rational explanation to all that had happened to him. It was a matter of finding some sort of key.

Turning off the main street he hurried down a cobbled alley which, like so many things here, looked vaguely, but not completely familiar. He passed this alley almost daily,

but had not walked down it for years. If he remembered rightly, a tunnel at the end led under three archways to some allotments and then a field with a brook running through it. Despite the time that had elapsed since his last visit, details of the field and brook came back to him as he hurried away from Pulcher. The brook was forded by a number of large, mossy stepping-stones, and on the far bank a line of willows wept so low that the tips of their branches trailed in the swift-flowing water. The field sloped to a thicket of hawthorns and nearby a tree-bordered path was approached by a weathered stile. He had played there during a long summer holiday and he had always meant to climb the stile and see where the path led, but had never done so.

He turned a slight bend in the alley, expecting to see the tunnel ahead. But it had gone. So had the railway-line. The cobbled alley was a cul-de-sac; and at the end rose the wall of the huge, featureless building he noticed earlier.

Pulcher, who had not followed down the alley, now leaned on a wall at the mouth of it, with an I-Could-Have-Told-You-So expression on his rubbery face. He pointed across the cobbles with his left thumb.

"Don't say you want to go back inside already! Anyway there's no entrance here. The House With No Windows has only one door. The African Potentate will tell you how to find that. Never been inside myself. One day, maybe I'll wake up with my head on a hook. But that's true and untrue, like everything else."

"Please talk sense," Tom said. "What is the House With No Windows? Where am I? And what am I doing here?"

Somewhere a bell started ringing. Then it stopped. Pulcher inclined his head, listening. "That's the House With No Windows *down there*," he said, with a preoccupied look as if he were still listening for the bell. "That's where all the others are. Every now and then they turn one loose just to make up the numbers in Marginburg. But they usually go right back again—especially when the Pirates are on the rampage."

"You mean I was once in the House With No Windows?"

Pulcher shrugged impressively and then grabbed his waistband.

"Oh yes, that's where you all come from. Except for regulars like Tilly and the Potentate and the Twin Giants and so on. I've never seen you around before."

So far as Tom could see, the town was deserted save for himself and Pulcher. He decided to stay with him a while in the hope of learning something about the setup and meeting the others who kept cropping up in Pulcher's talk. Perhaps his notions of logic had become modified during the past few hours; but it did seem now that Pulcher's words were making a bit of sense—as much as anything did in the present setup. He recalled a certain schoolmaster who had tried to teach him logic; and he wondered what the old boy would do in this present situation where the very Laws of Thought seemed invalid.

"Is this town Greenville or Marginburg?" he asked as they crossed the road towards the shops grouped between the post office and the dry-cleaners. He hardly expected an answer but Pulcher consulted his necktie again and said:

"Marginburg is the infinity where parallels meet. It is the back of the fabric which although it makes the pattern on the front has no apparent pattern itself. I think that's what it is. You'll have to ask the African Potentate. He'll tell you all about it."

"My main concern," Tom said, "is to get back to Greenville."

"You mean Dreamville, don't you?"

The bell started ringing again but this time Pulcher did not seem to hear it.

"*This* place could well be called Dreamville," Tom said. "I keep feeling I'm taking part in someone's nightmare. I've never . . ." He broke off in amazement as his eyes wandered to the window of a butcher's shop where several human heads were displayed on meat-hooks. Another head, com-

plete with black hair and beard, lay garnished with parsley on a blue, willow-pattern plate.

"Good God! Are you cannibals here?"

Pulcher shook his head and glanced with a puzzled frown into the window. "Oh no. We only eat our own species."

Feeling sick and afraid, Tom hurried past the grisly display. The buildings, mostly shops, passed quickly to the right of him, and for a while he was scared to look into them. His desire to get to Greenville and normality was almost maddening. He had no idea how long he was likely to be marooned in this place. The more he discovered the less attractive it appeared. And now it occurred to him that if the inhabitants were cannibals he might be attacked. Better arm himself with some kind of weapon! As he looked round for something to use as a club or a dagger, Pulcher came up to him, grinning happily.

Tom regarded him again, puzzled and horrified. What sort of personality could flourish in such an environment? To survive in a cannibal society, he thought with grim humour, you had to be tough—literally!

Pulcher pointed into a shop window and Tom saw a single object displayed on a bamboo table covered in red plush. For several seconds he gazed at it in amazement. It was a photograph of himself as a child. He had been seven at the time of the picture and did not remember having it taken; but he had seen several copies in possession of members of his family. The reason for its presence in the Marginburg window was beyond his grasp. And somehow the sight of it there on the bamboo table was more disconcerting than anything he had yet experienced, for it indicated the existence of a completely new set of solipsist cosmic values which he had never before even remotely considered.

Pulcher who had been admiring the photograph, now went over to the door of the shop, tried the handle, and, nodding gleefully to Tom, pulled it open and signalled him to enter.

The doorway was dusty and smelt of old, sunparched

wood. His reluctance to enter was bound up with a feeling of familiarity about the place. Somehow, he felt, it was personal and held secrets of his past life that he had forgotten and did not wish to remember.

"Don't you want to return to Dreamville?" Pulcher demanded.

"Greenville."

Pulcher shrugged and flapped a finger through the door.

"The African Potentate is on the Lower Level."

Stepping over the threshold, Tom felt his feet shoot forward and down. He clutched out and gripped a moving handrail. It was several seconds before he grasped that he was on a moving escalator. The door behind him shut with a thud. Pulcher, with a yell and a whirl of loose clothing, joined him on the tumbling steps.

Tom resigned himself to the gliding descent. For the first time since leaving the roadside bench near the boundary post he felt he was getting somewhere. Previously he had drifted. Now his movements seemed purposeful. But whose purpose was being served by the escalator was yet to be revealed.

Another escalator, Tom saw, ran parallel to the one he was riding. It moved in the opposite direction and the normality of this was comforting. For a while the other steps were empty but as soon as they became occupied the normality once more shattered. Tom watched, puzzled, as three upright suits of armour went by. Then an elderly woman appeared out of the smoky atmosphere ahead, passed him, and was carried slowly out of sight.

"Ah!" Pulcher said tensely. "The Sleeping Washer-woman is about. That could be a good sign or a bad one."

Mist hid the escalator for a while and something climbed past issuing strange squeaks and guttural noises. This passed with no visible indication of its shape or dimensions. After ten seconds the mist cleared and Tom saw a square white-wood table ascending the other escalator. A long sword with a curved hilt and a bejewelled pommel protruded

from the centre of the table. As it went by the table seemed to be bleeding.

Tom turned and watched it disappear into the mist behind. The last thing he saw before the mist erased it was an irregular pool of blood seeping down the escalator steps. He turned to his guide, hoping for some remark if not an explanation, but Pulcher was pointing ahead.

"Here comes Tilly the Windmill-Girl," he said in a broken voice as though he feared something ghastly was about to happen.

Tilly was quite naked. She was attractive in a plump, hoydenish fashion, and she carried a child's windmill on a stick. The vanes revolved rapidly in the draught caused by the movement of the staircase. Her hair rose behind her like a dark scarf as though the windmill were creating a gale. The most remarkable thing about her, Tom thought, as she passed behind him, was the expression on her face. It was one of stupid glee. Not once did she turn her head towards the men, but kept her eyes trained on the spinning windmill. Like Pulcher and the Sleeping Washerwoman, Tom decided, Tilly showed an example of adaptation to an extreme environment. Was it a law of nature, he wondered, that in order to survive in a crazy environment you yourself had to be crazy?

Finally, before they reached the foot of the escalator, he saw a large pig, balanced on its hind legs and wearing a black Homburg hat, step sedately on the up-going escalator and begin to rise with it. This would have caused him some astonishment had he not been so near the end of his immediate journey and therefore all keyed-up in anticipation as to what would happen when he met the African Potentate.

At the bottom of the staircase stood a huge cage in which two giant identical twins were operating a large treadmill which apparently provided the power for the escalators. They stood side by side. Their muscles gleamed smoothly as they moved their legs at a quick walk and as they walked

they kept looking ahead as though they were progressing along a road.

"Come on!" Pulcher gripped Tom's arm. "Let's go and see His Nibs. It's almost fish o'clock."

The African Potentate, a small, slightly-built Negro, sat at a table playing chess with himself.

"Excuse me one moment," he said as Pulcher ushered Tom through the door. He glanced at his visitor with a slightly bloodshot brown eye and then moved a light-palmed hand to the chessboard where, after some hesitation, he shifted a white pawn.

"Please don't imagine I wish to appear uncourteous," he said to Tom very solemnly, "but you must appreciate that my time is very sharply limited. Perhaps if you would state your problem in a single question that would be the best way to obtain a satisfactory answer."

"What's going on?" Tom said.

The A.P. smiled. He had white teeth with two gold fillings. He indicated the chessboard with a flourish of his right hand. "As you see, just a normal game of chess. Black opened with a Steinitz and . . ."

"No, I mean in the world up there. Marginburg or Greenville or whatever you call it? Everything seems topsyturvy. What happened to the Greenville Powerstation? And that little tunnel under the railway bridge that used to lead to a field? Nothing seems to make sense any more."

For a few moments the A.P. pondered Tom's outburst. Then, picking up the black queen, he said, "There is a perfectly valid argument to prove that God exists. There is also a perfectly valid argument to prove that God does not exist. Therefore God does exist and at the same time does not exist. And this applies to other things. Only in the world of make-believe can a thing be always true without its opposite also being true. Does that solve your problem?"

Tom noticed that the black queen in his hand had suddenly become white, and he wondered how he had worked the trick.

"No, it doesn't. But I've given up trying to make sense

out of anything here. Will you tell me how to get to Greenville?"

The A.P. replaced the queen and moved a black pawn.

"Go to the House With No Windows by the Only Door which lies at the end of Fantock Boulevard. Knock on the door and ask the Robot for a pair of indiarubber spectacles."

The Negro returned his attention to his chessboard. Pulcher, with a nudge and a nod indicated the interview was over.

Outside the Potentate's suite of rooms they got into a lift already occupied by the Sleeping Washerwoman and the Pig in the Dark Hat. Neither looked round as Pulcher and Tom entered. Presently the doors closed and the lift descended.

"Aren't we going the wrong way for the House With No Windows?" Tom asked anxiously.

"Shsss!" Pulcher pointed to the Sleeping Washerwoman whose hands moved compulsively in her sleep. The Pig in the Dark Hat watched the ceiling with lofty unconcern.

The lift jerked. The doors opened. Pulcher pulled Tom to one side and touched his forelock as the pig strode past them and through the doors. They went out into a poorly lighted tunnel.

The silence was broken only by their footsteps. Pulcher moved in his characteristic hop and skip pace which held Tom back, but he was completely lost now and depended upon Pulcher to lead him to Fantock Boulevard.

Presently another noise came from behind. It sounded alarmingly like a machine moving along the tunnel at some speed. And when Pulcher heard it he pulled Tom into a dark cavern opening off the tunnel. They got out of the way just in time to avoid a stampeding herd of antelopes which went by in a cloud of ammonia-smelling dust. Soon after the frightened beasts had passed, Tom was aware that a third person shared their cavern. He could not see who it was but could hear someone breathing placidly in the dark. His probing hand touched naked flesh. He felt shoulders and ... It was a woman. Then something hard and brittle

brushed against his face, and he knew the third person was Tilly the Windmill-Girl.

For several seconds he stood there, his excitement rising as his hands explored the contours of her body. Then he was aware of Pulcher tugging him towards the cavern mouth.

"Get out of here quick, Dreamville. Here come the Pirates!"

Tilly said: "Such nice neighbours, I'm sure."

"Come on!" Pulcher gasped.

"What about the girl?"

"Come on, or you'll never see Dreamville again!"

They started to run. From behind came shouts and stamping feet.

Pulcher kept up with him for a while. Then for several seconds Tom ran hard. When he looked round, Pulcher had vanished. Tom peeled off his jacket and ran blindly again. He seemed to be outstripping the Pirates but he felt all in. Breath shook like hot ash in his lungs. Pain spiked his ankles with every step.

Ahead the tunnel split. One branch was marked Feather Factory, the other Fantock Boulevard. The sight of the latter gave him enough energy to run to the end of it where a white door appeared in an otherwise featureless brick wall. On reaching the door he knocked on it with all his remaining strength.

He was admitted by a stiff-jointed robot who moved with the jerkiness of a jointed puppet. He ushered Tom into a store, took a measurement of his head and picked a pair of stiff rubber spectacles out of a pigeonhole marked Domino Seven.

"We'll soon have you in your cubicle," he said heartily.

They entered the main hall of the House With No Windows and Tom was almost stunned by the most startling thing he had seen that day. For the House stretched for miles in all directions and the whole of it was occupied by rows and rows of shelves, like the shelves of all the libraries in the world put together. But instead of the books the

shelves were occupied by living bodies. Each body was joined to a number of tubes. And across each face was fixed a pair of indiarubber spectacles.

Silently Tom followed the robot. They walked down a main aisle between the shelves and then turned left down a side-aisle. As they passed the living bodies he saw that many were muttering in their sleep, others showed agitation, but most were smiling placidly as dreamers of pleasant dreams.

At length they came to a man who was sitting up on his shelf and trying to tear the tubes away from his body.

"He's due for a period in Marginburg," the robot said as they went by. "He's probably dreaming his house is on fire or some other disaster has occurred."

Eventually they arrived beside an empty place on a shelf.

"Your space, little one," the robot said patronizingly. "Put on your spectacles and lie down."

"Will these take me back to reality?" Tom enquired, with the spectacles halfway to his face.

"They will give you logical dreams." The robot waved a stiff hand to indicate the shelves of living bodies. "This is reality."

Tom, reluctant to accept the statement, paused.

"But—but what is the purpose of it all?"

With gentle, practised movements, the robot pushed him down, and slid the spectacles over his troubled eyes.

"Purpose, little one? What can you possibly know about purpose?"



FLIGHT OF A PLASTIC BEE

by

JOHN RANKINE

Bio-mech—a fascinating word for human beings with plastic parts in place of their own worn-out organs. The first towards partial immortality. Where better to put them than in a space station where their longevity would be of continual use.

FLIGHT OF A PLASTIC BEE

MIDNIGHT was the lousiest time to get a problem orbiting in his head. So far in his first week on Station K, Paul Karadoc had kept his *angst* for notional daytime. Now it had crept up on him and put in its shrewd bite.

Bad, that. He reckoned to shrug anything off when his head hit the sack.

Maybe it was the artificial division into day and night. You can only fool all your reflexes some of the time.

One thing was for very sure—the recirculated, cleansed, disinfected and measured air ration flowing into his tin drum of a cabin was getting on his wick. He told himself he would have given a month's credits for a lush forkful of old-fashioned farmyard dung and spread it round with a hey-nonny-nonny.

Biological seals were on. The resident quack was running checks every six hours. It was as much as anybody could do to take a quick peek at a filthy thought. Personnel were so sterile that any intern surgeon could have carved them up and done a group limb shuffle without wasting a swab.

Somewhere at the back of his mind he wondered whether it was not just one more thing shoved in the way to make it tough for Security to get a line out. And that raised the interesting supplementary question of how in hell anybody on Station K would know that Security was moving in anyway.

That bothered him a little. Cover had never been a problem. A grade-one communications man, he was fully qualified to slip into the vacancy on Station K without raising a query.

He had put in for the top communications slot, which carried second-in-command status, in answer to a routine advert in the trade mag which circulated round the higher

echelons. Nothing rigged by Central Security. All his own work.

It was a gruelling interview, as he now recalled, with a trip by shuttle out to the station and a man-to-man chat with its Controller. Correction, man-to-woman chat. Controller of Station K was a trim, dark bio-mech, Dr. Margaret Scholes.

She had sat erect as though pushing the theory that a straight spine holds the key to eternal youth or maybe she had a tin one. After ten minutes he felt he was sloppy as hell. Fat gathering round his belly, bad posture, mouth breather, probably going thin on top. It was like a session with a recording angel, plus the uncomfortable certainty that this one had no bowels of compassion. No bowels of any kind more than likely.

But, eventually, she was satisfied. She was a Britisher from that comic-opera little survival anchored off the Confederated States. Kept the weird accent too, even when speaking English. As though she was talking round a hot plum, "Very well, Mr. Karadoc, I believe you will be just the man for our team here. I shall expect you on the regular supply ship on Friday next."

That was it. A brief writhing of the lips in a set of facial muscle which produced a charming smile and left the eyes stone cold. Then he was on his way back to pack a toothbrush and a few necessities for a three-month minimum stint.

From a direct vision port in the returning shuttle, he had taken a good look at Station K, set like a specimen on a black velvet pad. One of the oldest satellites to be still in full-time operation—a real tribute to the twenty-first century design team which put it there.

Main structure a tubular cross, with a cylinder at the end of each arm. Clever use there of second stage elements of the big supply rockets that brought the gear up. A long central cylinder piercing the hub; two hundred metres of it on a thirty-metre diameter. Delicate flaring at either end for a bell-mouthed docking collar. Simple. Functional. It had

done a good job for Transworld Communications Inc. for the best part of a century.

But its value depended on one-hundred-per-cent reliability plus. It was banker for confidential data beyond price. World peace was not so secure that it could stand sabotage from such a link. There were a thousand interests eager to profit from misunderstanding.

For a year now there had been growing suspicion that instead of acting as a simple staging post, Station K had been putting in a filter. Some leaks could not be explained any other way. The company had tied itself in convoluted knots trying to pin it elsewhere.

Routine checks had not turned anything up. Personnel, checked and double-checked, were clean as a hound's tooth. Then the top man at Transworld had put in a very quiet scream for Central Sec.

So. Here he was. Out on a limb indeed. A tubular limb with a tin drum cabin—one of twelve, set like a pile of astral checkers. Now, after old Neilson's death, there was this sterilization ploy which left freedom of movement strictly for fakirs.

All quite justifiable. Neilson, as a general maintenance mech, had been all over the station. No one could positively swear when he had last worked in his section. He could have left a biological trace anywhere at all. Nobody wanted to die like that.

Certainly not Karadoc who had seen it all before.

Teeth clenched, eyes bursting out. Pain in every square centimetre of skin that only a terminal drug could blank out. Ironical when he thought of it. We've whipped every ill that a million generations were plagued with, but the new ones keep coming up. As though it was a condition of life that there had to be a spider in the bottom of the mug.

He slid back every viewing port in a ring of curving panels and took a look out. Staring past his own image. Long oblong face, creased about the eyes and mouth from much grinning. A mobile, clown's face.

The centre tube, wheeling like a ship's mast against the stars, was picked out by lighted ovals. Working round the clock. Half a million channels in full use. Most of them fully automated, but enough wanting operator-care to keep twenty staff at the stretch.

A port opened on the inner ring and bulky, silver figures jetted out to the end of umbilical lines. Men of the late lamented Neilson's muscle squad on the everlasting chore of keeping the envelope in good nick.

Probably the whole shell had been renewed now, section by section. More than once, maybe. A form that was Station K remained, though its parts were transitory. There was a sombre thought lurking there somewhere; but he was in no mood to track it to its hole. Except that it made him think again of Dr. Maggy. What sort of bio-mech was she? How much of her original fleshly form had gone for scrap and was mocked up by artifact. Come right down to it, how much of a human being could you replace and leave a human being?

Ancient man had shuffled the seat of the soul around a fair bit. Heart, kidneys, bowels even, had taken the honour. Last and most serious contender, the computer brain itself had only lately been ruled out. Change the lot for sophisticated gadgetry and where did you get? What did you get, for God's sake?

The sum of the parts is less than the whole.

Fair enough, Karadoc. Let it go. Bustle about with your deer-stalker on or you'll be out on this dog's island for a full due, missing out on your living time.

Two minutes later he was all buttoned up in his space-man's disguise, making for the long tube that led to the centre. Lofty it was. On a twenty-metre diameter with two centre rails for up and down traffic. Old installation, but very serviceable. Hanging on to a double grip handle behind a small linear motor, he went down the line like a flying Gupta on a temple frieze.

Checking in at the main hatch, he got clearance from the sanitary detail inside. Reinforced by a millisecond electron

beam which was calculated to make any germ think twice.

Motivation was wearing thin. Seeing the totally enclosed communications gear in serried banks and the bowed, intent heads of the duty crew, he knew for a fact that no amount of pacing up and down was going to be worth that much wear and tear on his body fabric.

Karadoc went and stood behind Amaryllis Rowe. She was central in the long room, which was good. She was also the most worthwhile visual prospect for many a sea league, which was better.

Finding the overseer breathing down her neck, she uncrossed her legs like the unwinding of a DNA spiral and began to look that bit more full of dedicated zeal. A dark long-legged, sulky charmer, Amaryllis. Currently sitting revealed in a cadmium-yellow leotard with her regulation space gear neatly stacked and folded in the open locker beside her feet.

Flashing managerial expertise, he said, "And how is Miss Rowe then at the witching hour?"

To show her independent spirit, she delayed reply long enough to handle a little non-urgent business. Throwing a few keys with casual grace and calling an operator in Lisbon, "Station K. Your request for a reserved link has been noted, I will advise you." Duty done, she swivelled half round, found the range with very large, grey, candid eyes and said, "Busy, Mr. Karadoc."

Just a trace of reserve. Always the way, that. Any group as isolated as this one would be bound to develop a powerful in-feeling and anybody new on the command side gets slow acceptance. It was the story of his life. Always pushing, always levering a way in against psychological resistance. Then taking them apart.

Not nice. Not nice at all. He didn't want to play it that way with Amaryllis Rowe. But the choice was not for him. A rat is a rat is a rat, or something like that.

"Well, don't hesitate if you meet a problem. Karadoc never sleeps. Two heads are better than one."

"And much rarer."

A witty one this Amaryllis. He watched her key in another piece of business and took a wandering earplug to monitor it.

It was a plant-hire company fixing to have a detailed price tender on a client's doorstep for 0900 hours. She took a few seconds to set it up. Thereafter it was auto.

"What was all that about?"

"I don't know."

"You routed it. With very deft movements of those tapering fingers there."

"I know *that*. But I don't listen to what it's about. You'd go round the twist if you *listened* to everything."

"Where did you file it?"

She turned away with a slow burn that would have taken one layer of skin off a sensitive man and prodded her machine with a probing forefinger. It regurgitated a coded slip. She broke it off and handed it over.

"There it is."

"Get it for me."

"You know I can't do that. Only a countercheck from Controller Scholes can get anything out of the bank. She punches out a validity card on her personal authorizer. Feed in the two and you get delivery."

"How often is it done?"

"Hardly ever."

"When did it last happen to you?"

"It never has. I just know the drill. It's in the manual. A big, blue book. You should get your copy."

"Okay, okay. Don't keep all that charm for the customers. You have some different ways on this station. That one I don't go for. Clumsy. If you wanted something real fast you'd be in trouble. I'll talk to Dr. Scholes about it."

Resisting an urge to pat her cadmium-yellow bottom which was doing a great job as part of a morale-building arabesque, he soldiered on down the line of *fellahin*.

No one shoved a few metres of tape up his shirt with a guilty start; so he went on to his glass-screened cubicle of

an office where he had spent most of the day unravelling a circuit plot.

The week had told him that if there was anything to find it would be there. Previous traffic managers had applied good work-study techniques and littered the place with flow diagrams. Supervision had been first class. Whatever was bent had to be behind the panelling and that meant circuits. No glib analysis was possible there. Probably only the Controller knew enough electronics to appreciate all the possible angles.

Mostly the leaks had been commercial. Private code stuff being cracked and the substance made available to trade rivals. Millions involved and some very raw and angry clients. Just a few political, but those high-level packages went mainly by military satellite.

It had not taken long to see that no single operator could be involved. Items had come from every station along the computer bank.

Looking out along the line, Karadoc had a sudden insight that no one appeared to be making anything out of this. There was no pattern. No interest or group of interests appeared to be set for a bonanza. Sabotage by random chance? Hardly that, because the deliberate choice of outlet for information gained had to be organized by high-level selective intelligence.

That went nowhere to lessen the danger. Already, two big corporations had been pushed to the edge of insolvency. Multiply that and you got conditions for panic and the spread of alarm and despond. Another few months could bring major catastrophe to the commercial world. Then off on the vicious spiral with political trouble following up as sure as a gun.

Following a long habit, he urged himself on, with slogans, which appeared in a kind of gothic script against the inside of his forehead. "Go to it, Karadoc. The expectorant public looks to you to keep them in their dream of bliss. Go talk to the zombie quean."

Sometimes he had given himself good ideas by flashing

up such messages to himself. Mostly not, as he had to admit, but often enough to keep following them up. This time he felt it was a lousy suggestion for 0037 hours, but then she could be in bed. But it was not much of a surprise when her plummy, over-produced voice invited him to, "Come in, come in, Mr. Karadoc. I am very surprised to see that you are still about. I know you have had a long day."

All modest courtesy, he said, "Write it down to diligence. I'm just duty's slave."

"Why, other than to make a parade of virtue, did you want to see me?"

Nobody had told her about empathy, though this last seemed untinged by positive malice. Eyes made nil contribution. Just a comment without affective tone.

Still, it occurred to him that a normal number one exec would take umbrage and swipe back.

He said, "Vitriol. Vitriol. Pack up your ink horn and quill and I'll buy you a drink in the servo. Vodka for me and a pint of penetrating oil for the lady."

Usually, on such a station, the top brass would be one big happy family with the Controller first among equals. But the eyes which gave Karadoc a level and considering look were not friendly.

"The substance of what you say, Mr. Karadoc, does not offend me. You cannot know the liberation to the mind which comes from being independent of biological need. But the tone of it was insolent. You may as well know, from the first, that I do not tolerate it. I can, and will, see that you lose your present post with an endorsement on your profile that will make future employment in this field impossible, if you persist in this attitude. I remind you that I am Controller of Station K."

Doing her usual therapy-by-posture bit and brought to animation by rhetoric, she had all the earmarks of a real honey. Karadoc found himself driven back on to a little defensive monologue inside his head. Still running in script with illuminated upper case it reeled off, "Karadoc, you

lecherous nut. When you are finally found with a paper-knife sticking out of your chest—and statistics are on the side of it—it will be because you have been distracted by a long-legged woman. Any sack of old washers moulded roughly in the guise of a torso would take your eye off the ball. Keep your mind on plastic replacements and get back to business. Be suave."

Aloud he said, "That's all right, Controller. You are right and I am wrong. I shall be all smiling and courteous service. One thing bothers me a little on the operating line. This double check on material in the bank. Could it not cause dislocation? It's a time-waster. With staff quality and supervision as it is, we can surely let the operators check back on their own say-so."

"You have been quick to notice that, Mr. Karadoc. Perhaps you also saw how very infrequently such a course is required?"

"True. But it isn't the frequency. It's the importance of the isolated case. I can visualize hold-ups which would give our beloved co-operative the smear of old-time inefficiency."

"I will think about it, Mr. Karadoc. Is there anything else keeping you from your necessary sleep?"

This last was a real sneer from a near-immortal to one still chained by the leg. Karadoc saw there was no progress to be made. He took a look round to fix the detail of the layout.

It was an oval room on a long axis of about ten metres. Huge, direct-vision ports like black star maps. Facing the desk, the hatch he had used for entry, behind it a personal exit lock, with a very snappy line in silver-gilt space wear hanging ready beside it.

He said, "Not a thing. I'll wish you good night, Dr. Scholes. Be good and don't overwind your mainspring."

There was not a flicker this time, one way or the other. Only a cold deliberate stare from golden brown eyes with the flat glaze of an ikon. But something there hung out a warning. Paul Karadoc, no slouch for nudges of a sixth sense, felt that she knew more than she allowed.

He went directly home, pausing only behind A. Rowe long enough to put in an encouraging word, "Well done, well done. Your fingers have a delicate way with a knurled knob. Keep it up."

Back in the nest, he went to work with a selection of very special equipment garnered from the lining of a number of travelling bags. In under ten minutes he had a probe set up which gave him a voyeur's six-by-four centimetre keyhole into the Controller's office.

Tracking round, he focused her nicely on the left hand golden mean for the sake of composition. She was sitting like a figurine in a Stupa listening to a selected play-back of the day's take. Uncanny stillness of total concentration.

Karadoc settled himself to watch, with a stream of open-ended questions presenting themselves. What good was this bio-mech thing? Less than point one of one per cent of the population suitable for treatment and not all of them accepting it. Mostly women at that. Probably the sort who in time past would have got them to a nunnery. A similar cut-off from the common line.

Did it repay the price society had to pay? Continuity. Preservation of exceptional talent as a leaven in the human dough. But suppose, just suppose, they turned out to be a Trojan horse?

After half an hour, he was roaming about, coming back to his screen as though to a still picture. She did not bat an eyelid. In that time she had worked through a comprehensive sampling of every operator's labour.

Then he came back to find the screen empty and cursed himself for lack of perseverance. Urgent tracking round picked her up over by a viewing port. Bottle green leotard. A model for Ingres. Very unsettling.

He followed her as she went to her space suit and drew a flat platinum case from an inside pouch. Not a secret smoker, then? Residual vices. But it was a small square tablet which she took out and posted delicately in her full-lipped mouth. Fuelled for another stint? A very advanced bio-mech this one. Just a perambulating bag of micro gear

with a plasma pack to keep that peach-blossom skin in tone.

Quick tracking kept her in focus for a model's walk over to the hatch. Then she stepped out of vision and the door sliced back.

Paul Karadoc stopped thinking and beat the ten-second bogy for sealing up. Then he was jetting out from his exit lock over the shiny skin of the tubular arm. He worked round to the maintenance crew and had a brief word about the state of the fabric. Two minutes later, by staggered use of tethering lines, he was outside the Controller's private lock.

Once through the seal, he zipped off his suit and draped it over a chair. For five minutes there was absolute silence as he concentrated his search on the elaborate command console.

Obviously the Controller had to have access to the traffic, and that meant a private monitoring link to every operator. Karadoc stopped for thought with the front panel cover poised in both hands. What would it be then? Some kind of mixer. Two-way job. Bring it in, make it available for editing, push it out on another selected channel. Not much different from existing facilities. Very little. But it was there and he could see it with sudden clarity as he studied the revealed guts of the machine. Years of studying the diagrams paying off.

"Nice," he said quietly, but aloud. "Very nice. Using the zero bar. She's a very smart old lady, that one."

From a point behind his left ear her unmistakable fruity voice came up with, "And one, Karadoc, who would not allow herself to be out-manoeuvred by a child. Stand away from my desk. Over by the lock there."

Peremptory stuff. Minimal courtesy. It came as no surprise when he turned round, that the pragmatic sanction for this lapse from *grand dame* civility was carried in a small, bulbous service special aimed with steady care at the centre of his head.

Karadoc mimed willing co-operation, putting the cover

carefully on the desk top. In a casual follow through, he put his palm flat down on one of the raised studs along its edge which summoned operators from the factory floor. At the same instant of time a searing needle of fire drilled through his wrist.

She had altered her aim and fired before the button was well down.

Pain was enough for a second's pause in his computer depths. When critical thought was once more hot foot round the box, she was still ahead.

"Yes, you can ask yourself how I knew. Your rudimentary little mind has no secrets from me, Karadoc. Do you understand that? For days now I have known why you are here. Now you have found something out. It will do you no good at all. You will not report your findings to anyone and by your ill-considered action just now, you have condemned another person to share your fate. Unless, of course, you have enough control to keep quiet. It will be interesting to see what you will do."

She moved round to her desk and sat facing the hatch with the laser hidden by its mass and pointing unwaveringly on his navel.

The door sliced back and Amaryllis Rowe loped in, moving very well with that coltish action that some tall dark girls seem to have. She looked over at Karadoc, then at Dr. Scholes.

"You wanted to see me, Controller?"

"It's not important, Rowe. I believe you explained our double check system to Mr. Karadoc. He will be making a change. Please carry out whatever he suggests."

The girl looked at Karadoc, expecting a lascivious gloss. But the depressive nature of the recent chat and the pain in his wrist worked a temporary check. He let it ride, thinking that the good doctor was well-placed to drop him and turn the hose on Amaryllis before either of them could say "Plastic Immortal".

Doctor Scholes rubbed his nose in it. "Have you nothing to add, Mr. Karadoc?"

"No. I'll talk to Miss Rowe later."

"Very good. That will be all."

He saw the trim back recede through the hatch with a lot of nostalgia. It was likely to be a penultimate view of the female of the species. Except for the Doctor, and he now believed he could pass on that one. There was a lot in what the critics said about the plastic possibilities of the rear elevation. Definitely a baroque form.

Scholes said with some genuine amazement, "Do you not have one serious thought in your head, Karadoc? I am surprised that you should have been sent on this mission. I shall be doing the service a real favour in getting rid of you."

He said, "If you have so much concern for the service, why this sabotage?"

"You would scarcely understand it, Karadoc. Just move over to the lock. Seal up. You are going on a long trip. You will be a traveller for a long time. A personal orbit where you will have time to reflect on how you have spent the pitifully short span of your life."

"It would be something to think about if you let me in on your big secret."

"You could not understand my motives. No short-lived person could. We are the heirs to your muddled world, the new race. True communication is only possible to each other. Before we can rebuild the social and political institutions of our planet on a more rational plan, we must clear away the haphazard detritus of the centuries of childish mismanagement. My work here is a part of that overall aim. First confusion and general breakdown. We can survive it. We will sweep the mess away and begin again."

"Make the world safe for a handful of puppets to run down in."

"There are enough of us to remake society. Selected additions will be made from a small replacement breeding unit. It is all thought out, Karadoc. You are now wasting my time and although I have a great deal of it, I cannot spare any more. Get into the lock."

Paul Karadoc retrieved his suit and began to climb into it. Habit was hard to break. With the best will in the world he could only spin it out to twenty seconds.

Controller Scholes backed off and put on her own gear, making it clear that nothing in so doing would hamper her use of the laser.

When she was ready, she waved curtly to the lock and he stepped slowly into the first stage, there being nothing else to do. Alive there was always the outside chance.

Ejector mechanism was set for minimum boost. Just enough to take a man gently to the end of his line. Sealed up and ready to play the featureless executioner, she adjusted the lever for full thrust. Projectile stuff.

Karadoc, bound for the vacant interstellar spaces, turned in the lock to take a look at the emptying set.

Not much, he reflected, to carry into eternity. Zombie eyes through the crystal visor. But over her shoulder a little development. The main hatch was slicking back to cue in another protagonist.

Even the weight of years could not stop her from taking a brief look. Paul Karadoc let his own specialist training have its head. Before the eyes flicked back on target, the laser had changed hands and he was levering her round with pure stone-age technique.

He recognised the eleventh-hour adventist as A. Rowe paying a return call, but deferred welcome until Dr. Margaret Scholes was moving out of Station K like a trim silver torpedo.

When he was free to look, he recognized wearily all the earmarks of a contretemps.

With blazing, indignant eyes and fists all ready to beat his chest she asked the key question, like any simple heroine of a Biograph epic, "What have you done?"

She was one step from the alarm pull, when he got to her and grabbed her in a comprehensive grip. His voice, sepulchral from the small external speaker on the dome of his visor, said, "Hold it. Wait."

There was not much choice. She was still excited and he

noticed with pleasure that it added very effective texture to an already striking colour harmony. When he had hinged back his visor, he said, "You will be surprised, but our late Controller was a phoney. Working a sabotage angle."

Eyes still looked doubtful. She was struggling with disbelief.

Karadoc looked out of a crystal port. Controller Scholes was a diminishing, silver ring, foreshortened into a pelvic girdle. With the fuel tablets she had, she was good for a long, exploratory voyage. Months possibly, before meteoritic trash used up the self-sealing capability of her suit. A free-wheeling intelligence, circling the earth like the fabled Hula-hula bird. That should wither a few pansies.

Amaryllis Rowe, following his gaze, began to struggle again. Karadoc appealed to the nursing instinct as a time-filler.

"Break out a first-aid kit and fix my arm. She made a hole in it."

He shrugged out of his suit and saw with relief that she went for the errand of mercy. He went on, "Why did you come back?"

"You were looking very miserable. Not yourself at all. I thought you wanted a pretext to get away. Controller Scholes can be hard to take for a long session. I was going to ask you to come out and vet a request for a contract booking."

"You have an exceptionally kind heart. Now hear this and it's in absolute confidence. Understand?"

She nodded, busy with an iodoform pad.

"This Scholes was dangerous. You know bio-mechs can go right off it. She had got into a withdrawn state. Had a suicidal plan to kill all personnel on Station K and then herself. Germ stuff. Neilson was a try-out. When I got on to it, by accident, she was all for me doing a walk-the-plank-solo out there. I'll send in the full story. But believe me, this has to be kept close. It would undermine confidence in the station. Now I've been completely frank. Can I trust you?"

Candid eyes had cleared of doubt and she was looking at him with a very nice line in womanly sympathy.

He went on, "Good. Get back to the loom. I'll sit right down here and draft out that report. Come along to my cabin when the whistle blows and you shall see all."

When she had gone, he checked round and dismantled the unofficial link. "Not bad," he thought, and his private news flasher signalled it all in a cheerful rose-madder type. "Not bad at all. I'll carry on here and work out the contract in the cause of preserving my cover. One or two ideas for improving things around here. I'll be a regular civil servant. I am getting the rewards which patient merit deserves. I must never forget, it's later than anybody thinks."

Out of the direct viewing port there were many tiny moving specks to be seen against infinity's spangled cloth. Among them would be the withdrawn doctor, withdrawing further with every second. Central Sec could get on to that. Direct report there. Meanwhile a little literary effort for Amaryllis.

On the way back to his cabin, Karadoc thoughtfully collected two tall bottles from the servo. After all the poor girl had had quite a shock. He wondered how, with the clinical lighting which was standard all over the satellite, he could possibly arrange a little shade.

DEAD TO THE WORLD

by

H. A. HARGREAVES

With every human being identified by computer from birth to death, the State had a foolproof system of control—until an electrical fault recorded one man as “deceased” when he was still alive.

DEAD TO THE WORLD

IN the murmuring voice of a thousand quiet sounds, the great machine sang softly to itself; a never-ceasing, contented sort of song, sentient, and somehow self-contained. It sprawled beneath innumerable acres just on the outskirts of the once-small city of Rugby, North Dakota. Through its myriad channels, like blood through a human body, two hundred and fifty million cards moved swiftly, surely, momentarily caught here to receive an electronic notation, passing elsewhere to be relieved of that notation. In a hospital in Indianapolis a baby was born, placed before a scanner, touched briefly by tendrils at head, chest, wrist and ankle. A new card appeared in the smaller machine beneath that great city, to be duplicated an instant later at Rugby. IN97246IND38452 had been incorporated into the population of Americanada, had received her permanent ID card, and no matter what name she might be given by her parents, no matter what her friends might call her, no matter what husband she might choose, she would remain to the machines, those recorders, masters and manipulators of vital statistics, all sixty-five of them if required, as IN97246IND38452.

In Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, a police robot picked up one male, adult, from the prone position into which he had fallen, carried him through the crowd to the cruiser at the kerb, and after a cursory examination fished an ID card from the body's pocket, passed it through a scanner, and made a report. In machine number fifty-eight, about fifty miles north of that metropolis, card SA537SAS8442 was flicked into a side channel, passed beneath several recorders, and dropped at last into a receptacle marked Deceased, stilled for the first time in several years. Again, an instant later, card SA537SAS8442 was sidetracked in the machine

at Rugby, to drop eventually into a similar receptacle. This time, however, the one-in-a-hundred-million possibility discounted by technicians and authorities came to pass. As the card was flicked into the side channel a minute variation in current caused an "echo", and the card behind was flicked in too. So it happened that BE96647CON374699 came to rest, and shortly thereafter at Danbury, Connecticut, the duplicate did likewise—Deceased.

In Bethel, Connecticut, it was one of a lifetime of identical days for everyone, including Joe Schultz. Having finished his work at the antique furniture plant, Joe had decided that he wanted the company of an autoteria rather than the drab silence of his bachelor roomette. Prices being the same whether you slipped your ID card into the slot at home or at the autoteria, the main difference was that you could see the actual rows of offerings rather than mere pictures, and there was life, such as it might be, around you. Moreover, there were opportunities for an enterprising man like Joe. He had punched his choices, picked them up at the robo-cashier's desk, and noted with some discomfort that his receipt was blue, though it was still nearly a week till "pay day" rolled around. Well, he thought, often enough he was on the red by this time, and had once or twice even had to go through the lengthy routine of securing extra credit to be placed against his account a few days before pay day. And he was one of the fortunate ones: he actually performed physical work of a certain speciality, thereby gaining a little higher credit in his account. (Let no one ask how he had got the job.) He wondered how others could survive as mere button pushers.

Joe looked carefully at the diners, finally choosing one somewhat overweight, middle-aged woman who sat alone with her tray of calory-rich foods. Slipping deftly between tables, he came to a firm stop, flashed a brief smile, said "May I?" and sat solidly opposite her. For the first moment or so he concentrated on the fairly meagre contents of his own tray, ignoring the faint but insidious background music which was psychologically designed to speed up the

act of eating, to move more people through the place each hour. Then he began to size up his table companion, the "target", in order to plan his brief campaign. She was obviously unaffected by the music. A tough case for his purpose, but this made it more of a challenge. As an opening gambit, he deliberately pushed aside some of his greasy french-fried potatoes, clucking softly to himself. He caught a flicker of interest in the woman's eye, a hint of surprise, and it was all too easy after that.

"Keelosterole," he said to his companion, stabbing with his fork at a pale-green snap bean. "You know," he added, as the woman's brow furrowed with concentration, "gets the insides of your arteries." He went back to worrying the contents of his plate for a moment. Then, just as her attention was about to shift away from him, he flashed a rueful grin at the woman. "Had a buddy go that way last year, so I'm touchy on the subject. Nice guy he was, though. Big, happy, healthy, he looked, until the day he ... went. Hardened up arteries, the Doc said. Yes, sir. Heart couldn't take it, you know. Doc warned him. He said leave those calories alone, and those fat foods ... they're poison. Nothin' but poison. Old Art wouldn't listen, though. Nice guy, he was."

Joe subsided, just barely watching out of the corner of his eye as the woman's mouth went hard and straight. Then she shrugged her shoulders and picked up her fork. Joe shoved his half-empty plate away and lit up a cigarette, watching the news-fax as its words crawled across the far wall. The woman paused, fork halfway to her mouth. She took a mouthful of food. Slowly her fork came down, dropped to her plate as she sighed, pushed back her chair and heaved herself up. Only after she had left the restaurant did Joe slip her dessert on to his tray, finish his own meal in leisurely fashion and savour his prize. It had been easy after all.

Feeling as much at peace with the world as he ever did, Joe decided that his little victory warranted an extra cup of coffee, sidled over to the beverage area in a mood of self-

congratulation, and slid his ID card into the slot. For a fraction of a second it failed to register on him that his cup remained empty, that in fact the machine had rejected his card. Puzzled, he looked at card, cup and machine, then tried again. Again the machine dropped his card into the rejection tray. Joe stood in complete amazement, trying to think out what might be wrong, only moving away when the line behind him began to grow restive. Such a thing had only happened once before to him, and then he had been given sufficient warning from his red receipts but had chosen not to ask for advance credit until he actually ran out. But he knew the simple meal he had bought just now could not have run him completely through the blue and on to the red.

Shaking his head, he moved down to the end of the service spaces, to a slot with a malevolent red light over it, and a sign which read Official Enquiries. After a moment of hesitation he slipped his card into the slot and waited. The hum of scanning equipment stopped, but the machine retained his card for what seemed an agonizing length of time. Finally, with a kind of hiccough, the card was released, and from a special slot at the side there issued an instruction sheet. Joe pulled the sheet free and read with mounting incredulity :

NOTICE : The card you have found belonged to a person now deceased. Please deposit it in the nearest Government Incinerator chute, labelled Official Documents.

WARNING : It is a legal offence to retain the ID card of any person deceased. A record of this enquiry has been preserved, and action will be initiated if the accompanying ID card is not destroyed within 48 hours.

Aware now that something had gone drastically wrong with his "records", Joe was quite uneasy, but still, his mind told him, it must be relatively easy to straighten this out. He knew that occasionally something went wrong, and he had heard of people who had run into problems larger than

mere overspending. There was the legend of the guy who had been billed for something like one hundred times his expected life earnings, though. Seems, Joe mused, that he was made president of something so he could pay it off. That's right—he was made president of the foreign country whose loan had been placed against his account. Well, at least his own next step was clear. He would have to find a written enquiry booth, fill out a form and get this straightened out quick. Suiting action to thought, he left the auto-teria and headed for the local government building.

Half an hour later, Joe Shultz, deceased, was on the walkway again, shaking his head in utter disbelief. He had tried three different forms, none of which seemed precisely to fit his case, each one being returned by the machine with the identical notice and warning he had first received. Finally, in desperation, he had filled out a form requesting information on persons deceased and received a sheet directing him to his nearest Coroner's Office or an accredited Spiritual Advisor. With this sheet still clutched in his hand, he returned slowly towards his apartment block, painfully attempting to make some sense out of the situation. But more complications were still to come. On arriving at his own door, he found a pair of robo-movers meticulously cleaning up after having removed all his personal belongings and the one or two pieces of furniture that he had purchased over the past few years.

It was too much. In a burst of anger, Joe stepped in front of one of the movers and wrenched the polishing cloth out of its grasp. "Whatta you tryin' to do," he shouted at the machine. It simply stood still, waiting, humming to itself, while the second machine, obviously more complex, turned and moved swiftly up to him. Scanners moved up and down briefly, another sheet of paper was ejected at Joe, and both machines went back to work. Helplessly, he stood and read the directions for "Next-of-kin", which advised him that his goods had been removed under seal to a government warehouse, pending issue of redirection orders, and warning him that it was a felony to attempt to remove any

article, or to impede, obstruct, or in any way to interfere with the work of the robo-mover. Now totally confused, Joe wandered aimlessly from the building and down the walkway trying to understand what had happened to him in so brief a time, and to think of something, anything he could do next.

The Coroner's Office, his first sheet had said. But it would be closed now, he realized, and moreover if it was like the few offices he had been in there would be a robo-clerk anyway. He watched the faces of the few people moving purposefully along the walkway, wondering idly if any of them had ever run into such a problem. It would do no more good to ask for help from any of them than it would have to drop on to one of the motorways far beneath him, with its unceasing flow of muted thunder. You lived your own life, these days, and the fewer questions asked the better. Stop that burly guy there, for example, and ask him for help, he thought. Looks like the kind who would set you up for the hospital first, and find out later if you were trying to heist him.

"The hospital," Joe said aloud. That might be the answer. At least temporarily. He had been in hospital twice in his life, and each time it had been a very pleasant experience. Lots of rest, good food, even some nice-looking girls around, though they didn't have time to talk to ordinary patients. He could stand that, all right, at least for the night. Of course, if they stuck him in the analyser he might get thrown out, but the second time he'd been admitted they hadn't examined him till the next morning. He remembered being pretty riled up over that, thinking at the time that he might die before they got around to finding out what was wrong with him. And he'd felt pretty foolish the next day when they told him he'd just had too much of a bad batch of Alkade down at the Bethel Auto-Bar. At least it was worth the chance that they would admit him tonight, before they found out he was faking. "1900 right now," he mused. "Can't take a flipper anyway, if I can't pay the fare, so if I walk it will be 1930 when I get there. I'll wait till

2000 and then try to get in." He felt a bit better now that his mind was functioning again, though he still wasn't sure what he'd do next day. He set out towards the hospital, mulling over possibilities.

The little park in front of the hospital was pleasant, one of the newer models ingeniously designed to provide an illusion of isolation almost immediately one entered it. It took a sharp eye to determine which of the shrubs, trees and flowers were synthetics at this time of year, when everything was determined to grow, no matter what the odds. Joe noticed that the grass had recently been replaced: there was one spot where the manufacturer hadn't got enough green into it. In all, though, the effect came through, and he began to relax a bit for the first time since his card had been rejected. It was almost dusk, when the robo-watchman arrived and the concealed air rejuvenators had begun to hum, before he decided to try his luck at the admittance entrance.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped slowly through the doors and up to the desk, where a slim and decidedly junior staff member was busily stacking punched cards. In a hoarse and, he hoped, sick-sounding voice, he gave his name and asked to be admitted. The girl straightened up, faced him, and asked, "Could you give me some idea of what the, uh, nature of your complaint is?"

Joe had already thought this out in the park, and now he looked down at the floor, shuffled a little, looked at the back wall of the office and muttered, "Well, Miss, I'd rather tell a doctor. But it hurts a lot, a lot, you understand. If I have to . . . I could wait a little . . ." He let his voice trail off and shuddered slightly.

"I'll let you go to one of the emergency stalls," the girl said quickly, "and send an intern as soon as possible."

"Thanks," Joe said between gritted teeth. "Which way is it."

"Down this hall to your left," the girl answered, and as he turned to leave she continued. "You have your ID card with you, of course."

"Sure," Joe said, fishing it out and holding it up in front of the desk while she rose as if to glance at it. Then, faster than he could have anticipated, she reached out and took it from him, held it between trim thumb and forefinger, and slipped it into the admissions machine. Numbly, Joe stood waiting, not sure of what might happen next, but certain that something would. It did.

While the girl watched, horrified, two light-green robo-attendants moved swiftly and silently to a stop, wheeled stretcher between them. Before she could do anything to prevent it, they had picked up a submissive Joe, slipped him on to the stretcher, strapped him down and headed back down the hall. Joe had no idea of where he was going, but he was fairly sure it wasn't to an emergency stall. He was deftly wheeled into an elevator, plummeted into the depths of the building, and just as deftly wheeled out into a subterranean corridor.

In front of a door labelled *Morgue* they stopped for a brief second, and as it opened soundlessly Joe suddenly realized what had happened. He was paralysed with fear as the robo-attendants lined him up with toes pointing towards a bank of overlarge drawers. One of the machines opened the drawer as the other efficiently loosened the straps. Without really thinking, Joe sat bolt upright, slipped around the attendant, and made for the end of the bank of drawers. Looking back over his shoulder, he caught a glimpse of the two robo-attendants moving in futile circles, searching the floor for their missing body. Then the door opened in front of him and he was through it, into the corridor, and leaning weakly against the wall.

Summoning up his strength, Joe headed back to the elevator, punched the button and glanced feverishly over the floor list beside it. "Walkway Admissions—35," he read, and as the elevator door slid back he whipped in and punched 35. Breathing deeply as the car ascended, he tried to slow his racing pulse. Then, moving quickly without actually running, he retraced his path. Ahead, the little girl, as white now as her uniform, was explaining to a full-

fledged nurse, waving his ID card to give emphasis. Breaking into a run, Joe passed between them, grabbing his card on the way. Only when he was across the walkway and into the park did he stop, slumping down on to a bench to seek for calmness after his narrow escape.

The robo-watchman had passed twice, and was standing unobtrusively but warily in the shadows of a Manchurian Elm down the path, before Joe had collected his wits sufficiently to consider his next move. Hospitals were out. The Coroner's Office was closed. His "accredited Spiritual Advisor" seemed like the only remaining hope, and here there was a small problem. He had never had even a nodding acquaintance with a Spiritual Advisor, though he knew they existed in some sort of continental association whose advertising he had been exposed to.

Trying hard to remember the name of the association, he went quickly back across the street, down the express escalator till he came to a visitors' entrance, and cautiously moved through the hospital lobby to a seetalk booth. Thumbing the scanner for the Yellow P., he watched racing capitals until S appeared, then hit the mid-speed until Sp came up, and switched to slow until Spiritual Advisors showed. "Christian Unitarian Spiritual Society" was second in a short list that began with "Buddhist Friends Society". Scanner reversed, he moved at high speed back to the C range, stopping at CUSS. It took a short time to find the address of his nearest advisor, the list again containing fewer names than he had expected. He was about to place his call when he realized that he could no longer do so, since one had to present his ID card even for a collect call. Instead, he memorized the address and took to the walkway yet again, happy to be doing something to keep his mind from being paralysed by creeping hysteria. Within fifteen minutes he was standing before the sub-level apartment door of Benjamin Scroop, B.A., M.A., B.D., Ph.D., D.D., Spiritual Advisor.

Scroop, Joe quickly learned, was a man who clearly gave far more attention to the needs of the spirit than the body.

He stood about six-five, weighed about one-sixty, and had huge, wistful brown eyes that looked from a distance like chocolate mints adrift in a bowl of instant milk. Eager to be of help, he invited Joe to step in and unburden himself, and Joe accepted. It was incredible, Joe thought, as he squeezed on to a thinly-upholstered bench at one side of a fold-down table, how much could be recessed into the walls of an Efficiency Living Space. He had read about the E.L.S. in passing, but this was his first experience with one. Here were three rooms, counting bathroom, in a space smaller than his one-and-a-half. No door, of course, between this and the bedroom, where he could see three triple-tiered bunks folded up to the wall. Scroop answered his casual question with a rueful "Seven. Seven children, my wife and myself. The children seem to spend every waking minute at the House Centre, and my wife works. It's only crowded for breakfast, supper and sleeping."

Joe made an inane comment about not needing an office with such an arrangement, thinking all the while that in these surroundings a well-fed soul *would* be much more comfortable than a well-fed body. But it was time to get down to his problem, since he figured the rest of the family would be back pretty soon. Briefly he sketched out what had happened to him, and filled in details in response to precise questions from the extremely sharp Scroop. This character, Joe thought, might be a Spiritual Advisor, but he certainly seemed to know the shape of the hard world outside his door. He allowed himself a bit of hope.

But any optimism he might have generated was soon squelched by Scroop, who said quite frankly that in his dealings with the Coroner's office he had gone through more foul-ups than straightforward situations. No more than two months ago they had, on the same day, cremated a Fleshly Resurrectionist, and mummified a Fiery Purger, both with relatives seeking Scroop's counsel. If anything, the robo-clerks were more to be trusted than the occasional human clerk, who invariably fed the wrong data into the larger machines. As for the Chief Coroner, he was in

Danbury Proper and Scroop had suspicions that he wasn't human either, since his decisions were arbitrary and calculated to inflict spiritual suffering on the living, if they could merely subject the dead to indignities. Joe commented that from his own knowledge of the world it sounded as if the Chief Coroner were all too human. However, he saw there would be little help in that direction, and asked if there were any other way Scroop could think of to get him out of his now-desperate situation.

Scroop could think of little more that might be done, and they were slowly discarding possibilities when, in quick succession, the rest of the Scroops arrived home for sleep. A few of the youngest wanted milk, and Joe, after much urging, accepted the cup of coffee he had tried to get so long ago. Well, it seemed ages ago, even if it was only five hours. Scroop used his Householder's ID Card, and Joe couldn't help but notice in such close quarters, that the family was on the red. He felt an unaccustomed flush of guilt, as he realized how hard it must be to feed and clothe this mob. Scroop had seen his discomfort, however, and laughed a bit ruefully, trying to make Joe more at ease. "Don't worry about it," he said. "In this house it's the children who feed the rest of us, anyway."

Joe wasn't used to family life, but he knew that children didn't get all that much government allowance, so he raised an eyebrow. Scroop explained. "You see, all the money that people donate to our Society is deducted from their accounts by the government. It's used first to cover land taxes and rent, next mission expenses, then operating expenses, and finally the rest is evenly distributed in salaries. I make about half as much in a month as one of my children gets in subsidy. But the children, bless them, believe in the work I do, so they have all, at age six, given up their personal allowance entirely to our household account. It's a rare display of faith in their parents on the part of youth, especially for these days." Joe was forced to agree. Things hadn't been so totally controlled by government until after he had left home, and he wondered if he would have con-

sented to such a thing when he was a kid, considering the tough times his family had seen in the Soaring Sixties.

After the children and Mrs. Scroop had gone to bed, Joe and Scroop sat talking for a short time, but it was clear that there would be no solution here. Scroop promised to make out as many forms as he could think of that would be remotely related to Joe's case, but he did not hold out much hope for quick relief. He offered to put Joe up and feed him, and he was sincere, but he and Joe knew it was next to impossible under the circumstances. Without seeming to rush, Joe brought the talk to an end. "If I don't mosey along," he finally said, "my friend Max will've gone to bed. And he doesn't like to be woke up late at night. He gets real ugly. So thanks for everything, and I'll be dropping around sometime. I might even take in one of your services." After a firm handshake and a look of real compassion from Scroop, Joe found himself outside, heading for the blessed walkway, this time presumably to see the mythical Max, who, Joe decided, lived under a bench in the park across from the hospital.

Back in the park, with the time nearing a murky 2400, Joe carefully chose a secluded nook surrounded by thick shrubs and overhung by an original New England oak. He had not realized how tired he was until he stretched out with his jacket under his head. Then, despite the turmoil of his thoughts as he tried to find some way out of his dilemma, he dropped into a deep, uneasy sleep. He dreamed of running down long, twisting corridors whose walls pulsed rhythmically, threatening to close on him. Paradoxically, it seemed that he could always see a dark abyss at the end, no matter what direction he tried. Then, dimly, he became aware of an insistent, toneless voice, and slowly roused to find the robo-watchman standing over him in the darkness of the park.

"It is forbidden to remain off the pathways after dark," the watchman repeated. Joe was stiff, incredibly tired and totally discouraged. He could think of nothing more to do, so he lay there in complete resignation.

"I will be forced to call for the police if you do not leave at once," said the watchman, and Joe thought, well, it had to come to this sooner or later. Then he brightened. Why not? Why not go to jail? At least he would have a place to sleep in peace, and maybe someone would straighten the whole thing out when his case came up. Of course, loitering must be a minor offence and he would be dealt with by machine again, but at worst he would merely stay in jail. He put his hands behind his head, relaxed and waited.

It couldn't have been more than three minutes later when the robo-cop arrived, moving swiftly and competently across the grass while his companion remained behind, at the cruiser. Joe had obligingly placed his ID card on his chest, and now he waited with grim satisfaction to be apprehended. But it didn't happen quite that way. After a quick glance, the robo-cop's tentacle flicked down and took his ID card, shoved it into its scanner, and transmitted the information. Joe watched with bewilderment as his card was placed back in his shirt pocket and the robo-cop stood still, obviously waiting. Then with a soft swoosh a "black hack" settled on the grass close by, two attendants got out with wheeled stretcher, placed him on it and wrapped him in a sheet, put him in the back of the vehicle and took off.

This time it was the District Morgue, but the procedure was precisely the same. As the sheet was unwrapped, Joe slipped off his stretcher and made for the door. Glancing back, he saw the attendants making those same futile searching movements in widening circles around the floor. It was somehow ludicrous now, as Joe made his way in leisurely fashion through the sub-basement area, not really caring where his wandering took him. It was almost pleasant down here, the warm, dim passage inviting him to find a little nook or cranny, curl up and finish his sleep. He had to make a real effort to keep going, realizing that this was no solution either: that he had to make his way to the outside, if only to eat. And now that the thought had

occurred, he was acutely hungry. It must be early morning, at least.

0530, said the clock over the back entrance to this level of the mammoth civic building. He knew he shouldn't really be so hungry, but Joe had been through a lot since supper the night before, and it definitely wasn't all psychological. He would have to find some way to get breakfast, and if it required desperate measures, well, it was a desperate situation. One or two meals he might go without, but he wasn't going to starve, even if it seemed that the "machine" was intent on having him dead to make the records accurate. He set out for an autoteria, still not quite sure of what his next move would be.

There was a big one only a block down, and Joe stood across from it watching the early-morning crowd scurry in and out. There was no use going in until he knew what he would do. He could try to force the serving doors, but he couldn't guarantee that they would pry open easily, and besides, there would be loads of people watching him. Not that it mattered much now, but he still wasn't ready to commit an open theft. No, there had to be a better way. What about a back entrance, he thought. It has to have a service area. He began to search, and before long found a neutral grey door marked *Food Services*. Gently, he tried the door, opening it slowly until it stood wide, revealing a small room with three more doors. One said *Accounts*, one said *Maintenance* and the third said *Unauthorized Persons Not Permitted*. Like the old stories on Kid-vid, he thought, in a flash of wild humour. Obviously it was the last that he wanted, and without further delay he opened it and passed through.

To his left a scanner blinked officiously at him, demanding that he present his ID card, but he was interested in the magnificent view that stretched in front of him. Racks of prepared plates lined one side, coming up on a conveyor belt from an escalator at the far end, while smaller belts moved endless amounts of food to the pigeon-holes where customers made their purchases. Entranced, Joe watched

toast and jam, eggs, bacon and eggs, ham and eggs, pancakes, muffins, buns—enough for an orgy. Then, shaking his head as if hypnotized, he loaded himself down with pancakes, bacon and coffee. He reached across a belt and picked up knife, and fork, seated himself on a stack of waiting trays, and began wolfing his meal. Halfway through the coffee, the robo-cop came. Joe stood still, licking syrup off his fingers, as the cop moved warily into the room blocking his escape. "Please do not move," said the cop, "or I will have to detain you by force." Joe reached for his coffee cup, and almost too fast to be seen the robo-cop pinned his arms to his sides. Another tentacle snaked out and checked his pockets, removing his ID card and inserting it in the scanner. At the same time, Joe felt himself being touched at head, chest, wrists and ankles; a procedure that had familiarity somewhere beyond the fringes of memory.

The robo-cop hummed as time spun out, and Joe began to sense that something was not going quite right. Gradually the hum increased, the robo-cop's visual sensors began to glow brighter, and it even seemed to Joe that the tentacle that held him grew tighter. Soon he could smell the odour of scorched insulation, and see tiny wisps of smoke issuing from minute fissures in the robo-cop's shell. At last, with a belch of smoke and a drunken lurch, the robo-cop disgorged his card, unrolled limp tentacles, and went dead. Amazed, Joe could only watch for a moment or so. He had never seen any piece of automated equipment do this before, particularly none with any degree of independent decision-making abilities. It was almost like watching a person die. He picked up his card half-expecting the cop to come to life and seize him again, but nothing happened. Regaining some composure, Joe moved cautiously to the belts, picked a slab of apple pie, and with studied disdain held it between thumb and fingers as he swaggered by the silent, burnt-out robo-cop. Only when he reached the outer room did he hurry.

It was 1000, and Joe Schultz, deceased, was reclining in a luxurious bed, in one of the most luxurious hotels in the

Greater Danbury area. He had got there by the simple expedient of reaching across the end of the desk, behind the recepto-clerk, and taking one of the two keys in a slot nearest him. Check-out time was 1400, European style, he knew from the high-priced ads. following the news-fax. He might have seven hours of uninterrupted sleep, he figured, but if he were interrupted, so what. For Joe Schultz had found the solution to his problem. It had been right there in front of him all the time, if he had only stopped thinking like a good, law-abiding citizen. The real tip-off had come when the robo-cop, good law-enforcement officer that it was, had broken down under the onslaught of conflicting information. When it apprehended a moving, living law-breaker, it seized and identified both ID card and offender. Joe knew little about the information patterns of such machines, but he lay there in delight, imagining what had gone on. Offender carried card of Joe Schultz. Joe Schultz was deceased. Offender was identified therefore as . . . Joe Schultz. Joe Schultz was deceased. Offender was alive. Offender's card there identified him as . . . Joe Schultz. Pluooi! And if he preferred, he could always stay absolutely still, to be carted off to the morgue. He squirmed and stretched into a more comfortable position, drifting off into sleep as he envisioned the clothes he would secure, the foods he would eat, the places he would sleep. In the immense peace of the truly free, Joe Schultz lay, dead to the world.

THE HELMET OF HADES

by

JACK WODHAMS

Psychologically, this is a grim story—one of induced blindness and of the few who exploited those afflicted, but behind the horror Australian Jack Wodhams produces a fascinating philosophy.

THE HELMET OF HADES

His mother switched on the light. "Vincent, darling, whatever's the matter?"

Vincent cringed under the bedclothes. "It went out," he whimpered.

She came and sat on his bed. "Oh, honey, you should have been asleep."

"But it went out," he said, tears trembling in his eyes.

"Probably the bulb blew, dear. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"But I couldn't see, Mummy, I couldn't see!" A sob caught his voice.

Mummy soothed him and calmed him down. After a few minutes she was able to tuck him in and give him a kiss.

"You won't put the light out, Mummy?"

She paused. "No, darling, I won't put the light out."

A moonless night for the boggy men and things that creep, and a footfall unseen that creaks a board. The wind sighs and rattles a door and invisible fingers straighten the hair on the nape of the neck. Ghostly forms dare to move only in the corner of an eye, and spirits move with menacing subtlety to loom closer and closer, blacker than the night itself, enfolding, swallowing, absorbing, a darkness awful in its infinite depth and immensity.

"Every kid's afraid of the dark," Vincent's father said. "I thought he'd grow out of it."

"Well, cutting off his night-light when he's asleep does no good. He wakes up screaming, Matt. It's a nightmare for the boy."

"Okay, okay, I know what you want. All right, send him in for proper treatment. I was just hoping he'd get over it himself . . ."

Tally-ho and the fear-bug is hunted and hounded, sniffed out and driven, is denied its familiar highways and byways, is pursued along side-lanes, is flushed from dark alleys, is dug from out cracks and corners and crevices. And the movements of the fear-bug become more and more hampered as lasso and lasso fall on it and tighten, hindering it, constricting it, tying its fleet feet, till at last it cannot move, till it is helplessly mummified in ropes of conviction. And the fear-bug falls, securely a prisoner, and the huntsman in triumph rests his foot on the captive and poses . . .

"Here we are." Dr. Riminez opened the door and light from the passageway dispelled the pitch darkness of the room. "Vincent, here's your father to see you. He's come to take you home."

"Hullo, Dad," Vincent said calmly.

A chilling chuckle came from one corner of the room and *something* began to slither across the floor.

"Vincent has spent a week now under these and similar conditions," Dr. Riminez said. "He has responded very well to treatment. He is a highly intelligent lad and it has been merely a matter of getting him to rationalize and bring solid speculative reasoning to offset and defeat wild fanciful imaginings."

The temperature of the room dropped rapidly and an odorous animal snuffled and grunted into strong illusory presence.

Vincent's father shivered. "This room gives *me* the creeps," he said. "How do you feel, son?"

Vincent laughed. "It's quite fun, really. Identification, logical assessment, guessing what and why."

"Constructive, positive imagination," Dr. Riminez said. "Vincent only needed guiding."

"You know, Dad," Vincent said, "I quite like the dark now."

The fear-bug, an enemy, beaten back, cast about with controlling coils, restricted and circumscribed, slowly sank

in the years and became buried, a quiescent pupa forgotten in the depths of mind.

Cresswell looked out from the air-lock at Albamarle City, Planet Albamarle. A typical one-settlement foothold, it had been sited well in a high valley, with an adequate river close to hand. Rich vegetation was thick on every side and Cresswell smiled at the legend, *Albamarle Spaceport*, fadedly hung at the entrance to half a square kilometre that rarely housed more than the perennial beacon buoy.

He climbed carefully down the outside of his ship and lowered himself to the turf. The 1.1 gravity dragged at him and seemed terrific, but then, after a prolonged period of weightlessness, even .5 gravity made a man feel that the attraction would turn him into a tent-peg.

Cresswell flexed his muscles and glanced towards the entrance. Two men entered, bearing between them a simple palanquin. They jogged steadily towards him over grass so richly green as to be almost black. As they drew closer, Cresswell saw that the person seated in the vehicle was a young boy and, further, that he guided the lead carrier by reins attached to a harness on the man's head.

"Ho-up!" the boy cried, jerking on the leathers.

The lead man staggered as he was thus brought sharply to a halt.

"Hold steady!" the boy yelled. He twisted his head. "Bring the back round."

The rear man shuffled.

"That's enough. Now one pace forward. That should do it. Put it down there."

The men lowered the palanquin on to its legs.

The boy swung his feet out and sat facing Cresswell. "Got to tell them every damn thing," he said. He took an apple from a side pocket. "And who are you, then?" he asked cheekily.

Cresswell's mouth was grim. "What's this?" he said, indicating the two men and the conveyance.

"My chair, of course," the boy said. "What does it look like?"

Cresswell's teeth met with a click. "Listen, son, I don't know who you think you are, but one more crack like that and I'll knock your head off."

The boy looked down at his feet. Cresswell had the impression that he was concealing amusement. Aggravated, Cresswell said, "Do you hear me?"

The boy lifted his head, traces of a cocky smile still on his young face. "If you follow me, I'll take you to the Hotel."

He pulled his feet in nimbly and cried, "Hup, Dobbin!"

The men lifted the palanquin and, for the first time, it struck Cresswell that they were blind.

A Marshal must not take precipitate action. He must fully examine and assess. A Marshal must not jump to conclusions, but question, assemble facts, impartially endeavour to view all aspects, to be prepared to fairly modify justice to suit special circumstances.

"You the owner of this place?"

"No, I'm only the barman."

"Town seems very quiet. Where is everybody?"

"There's a festival on one of the farms. You know how it is in a small community."

"You can't have many ships calling here. Didn't you get my pick-up signal?"

Galig, the barman, smiled lazily. "That's why we got the festival going. In your honour, more or less. Don't see strangers much. I've got to okay you and take you along."

"Oh. Uh, I see."

"Like a lot of folk on the Fringe, we tend to be suspicious of strangers."

Cresswell studied him closely. "Yes," he said. "Policing has not been too frequent in these parts. Things will improve, we hope. The boundary is spreading out every which way all the time, and it's not an easy job."

He flipped his identification laminate on to the bar. "I am Marshal Cresswell of the Judiciary Service."

Galig raised his eyebrows a little. "A Marshal, huh?" He ignored the badge.

Cresswell put the laminate back into his pocket. "That's right. Making a routine call. Albamarle is not totally beyond the reach of civilization."

"That's nice to know," Galig said. "Like a drink? There's no crime here."

"Glad to hear it."

The boy from the palanquin sauntered in and climbed a stool to lean on the end of the bar.

"There's one thing I'd like to know," Cresswell said, his sternness returning. "Who the hell is that young lout?"

Galig glanced up the bar. "Him? Oh." He shrugged. "He's an assistant to the boss. What would you like? Pelmar whisky? Cobalt rum?"

"Is it usual for him to be carried by two blind slaves about the town?"

Galig coughed politely. "They're blind, and work is hard to get," he said.

"Why don't they go to a Frontpost for treatment? Nobody need be blind these days."

"No money. And no transport. You're the first for a long time."

"But the job they're doing. It's . . . it's degrading."

Galig shrugged again. "Way out here, beggars can't be choosers. How about trying a shot of opak? It's a local brew with a unique flavour."

He poured the Marshal a nip. He turned his back. Cresswell heard the clink of glass and looked up from his brooding to see Galig draining a small tumbler.

Galig caught his eye. "Drinking the profits," he said. He licked his lips. "Good stuff."

Cresswell picked up his own glass and sniffed. The aroma was not unpleasant. Cautiously he sipped. The liquor had a very fine, very full-bodied flavour indeed. "As you said, a very good brew." He swallowed the remainder of the drink

and set the glass back on the counter. "Very smooth," he said.

The barman grinned lopsidedly. "Most people that drink it like it, first off."

Cresswell looked from the oddly mocking expression on the barman's face to the boy at the end of the bar. He was watching Cresswell bright-eyed, with a hand in front of his mouth that only partly hid an unaccountable joy.

"What's he laughing at?" Cresswell said sharply.

"Who? Clyde? Oh, he's just waiting."

"What for?"

Galig rinsed the Marshal's glass under a tap. "You know, people who drink raw alcohol, like methylated spirits, or maybe absinthe, or that kind of stuff, they tend to go blind."

"So?"

Galig put his spread palms flat on the bar. "So opak does the same thing, but very much quicker."

At the end of the bar the boy tittered. He seemed to have trouble containing his mirth.

Cresswell took a pace back. "You drank some yourself."

Galig was deprecating. "That was by-play with a different bottle," he said.

The boy slapped his knees in delight. "Oh, Ben, Ben!" He bounced on his stool.

The boy's radiantly expectant face, flushed and eager, was the last thing Cresswell saw. Suddenly his eyeballs took fire, his pupils seeming to become red-hot.

Involuntarily he reeled and cried out, and pressed his fists into his eyes. "What have you done? What have you done?"

The boy cackled with laughter and Galig chuckled indulgently.

The pain left as immediately as it had come and Cresswell blinked and lowered his hands, his expression provoking a further burst of hilarity.

He could not see. Black. All black.

He was blind.

He woke to cool fingers gently bathing the weals on his back. He stared into the void of starless space and memory flooded his mind. Target for whip-ray treatment.

He started and jerked over on to his side. The fingers drew back quickly. "Who are you?" Cresswell demanded.

There was no answer. In the silence Cresswell became conscious that he was surrounded, by small noises, small creakings, people breathing, a snore and a snuffle. "Where am I?"

"You are in the fifth dormitory." Her voice was soft and low. "You are blind?"

Cresswell clenched his fists. "Yes. Yes, I'm blind."

He heard her sigh. "We are all blind here."

Cresswell propped himself on his elbow. "You are blind, too?"

"Yes," she said. "There are only three people on Albarmarle with eyes." There was pain in her voice as she added, "And a few children."

Cresswell was shaken. "Do you mean to tell me that the bulk of the population is sightless?"

"Yes."

"How many of you are there, for God's sake?"

"There are over a thousand of us," she said quietly.

Cresswell slumped slowly back on to the bed, ignoring the pain from his lashings. "One thousand," he said, his voice hushed with shock. "One thousand of you? How the devil did it happen?"

"Opak," she said simply. She sighed again. "It was discovered by accident. A settler distilled the berries of a peculiar local fruit. He went blind." A slightly bitter note crept into her tone. "By chance, Ben Galig, the hotel barman, had that day off and went shooting. He came across Will Hishmato wandering about his farm. From then on . . ."

"He deliberately persuaded people to take the drink, as he did me?"

"Yes," she said. "He secretly experimented on a couple of outlying farmers, typical hermits. He thought it was a big

joke. Nobody knew and right then the Albamarle Fourth Anniversary fell. I was sixteen."

Tiredly now, she said, "On Anniversary Day, Mr. Jerreld, the hotel owner, was sick, so Galig said, and he took over. There was games and food, drinking and dancing and nearly everyone was in the square. In a small town such a thing is a big occasion.

"Then, as evening came on, Galig stood up and made an announcement. He declared that a great new discovery had been made, one that would make Albamarle famous. Will Hishmato, he said, had created a drink that was superior to anything in the Universe, an elixir, a drink so delicious that it had to be tasted to be believed."

She took a breath. "He could talk. He was smooth and he chose a perfect psychological moment. When he proposed the simultaneous toast to the future of Albamarle, every person in the square had a paper cup of opak in their hand.

"We had no reason for suspicion. We were all happy. We all tasted. We all liked. We all drank."

"Good God!" Cresswell said.

Dispassionately she continued. "It was all very confusing at the time, as you can imagine. Folk nearly went out of their minds. And Galig searched out those few who had missed the celebrations or had left early. By trick, mostly, but sometimes by force, Galig and his crony, Brent, made every man and woman blind, and nearly all of the children."

"What the devil's his idea?" Cresswell said angrily.

"Galig has a favourite saying. 'In a crowd of blind beggars, a one-eyed man is King,'" she said. "As he has two eyes, he calls himself King Double."

Cresswell shook his head. "It's fantastic," he said. "He can never hope to get away with it."

"Why not? He has for several years. Who cares about Albamarle?"

"You said there are some children who can still see?"

"Yes." In a strained voice, she said, "Apart from Galig and Brent and old Doctor Hillop, six children have been

selected. Galig is training these children to be our overseers."

Cresswell ground his teeth. "Is one of them named Clyde?"

For a moment she was silent. "Yes," she said. "Clyde Prekosi. He's ten years old, going on eleven. He is the Group Leader. The other children are younger. One is only seven."

Pain penetrated Cresswell's back and he groaned and rolled over on to his stomach.

"You should not have tried to resist them," she said. Her compassionate fingers soothingly resumed bathing his wounds.

"What was I supposed to do?" he fumed. "Nothing? Just because you are blind, have you never thought of attack? Have you never devised a means to squash him?"

"Sshhh!" she said. "Not so loud. He might hear you."

"Is the place bugged?"

"Sometimes . . ." A new diffidence was in her voice. "He . . . overlooks everything. Sometimes . . ."

"Well? Sometimes what?"

He heard her breathing more quickly. "We have learnt to sense when he is there, but . . . we have no . . . no real privacy. We cannot know. He is very quiet, and when he laughs . . ."

Cresswell digested this and his blood began to simmer and fill his head with red fumes. "And you women? You are subjected to . . . to this? Are . . .?" He drew in a hissing breath.

Her fingers lightly sought the lumps on his back. She did not answer.

Passionately he smashed his fist into the pillow. "Blindness!" he choked. "Blind! In this day and age! Blind, blind, blind!" He gripped the mattress ferociously.

An icy douche of cold horror made his muscles go rigid as Galig said, "You'll get used to it, Marshal," and chuckled.

In its bonds, an old memory stirred and took up once again the faint pulse of life.

"Stop talking there!" the voice piped. "Line up! Line up!"

"Not you, Marshal," another voice gurgled. "You're going on a special training course."

Cresswell recognized the cocky tones of Clyde Prekosi. Another boy giggled. Some string brushed his face and draped over his shoulder. "Hang on to that," Clyde said. "I'll lead you to your job. Hup, Dobbin!"

Cresswell gripped the string and was consumed with white-hot rage. For a brief moment he verged on berserk insanity. The moment passed as quickly as it had arisen and at last his primitive reaction to the shock was over, his panic-fever under control. Trained grim reasoning logic reasserted itself in his mind.

When the tug came on the string, he followed docilely. He seriously began to assess ways and means.

Emotionalism in a law-officer is frowned upon. A Marshal must at all times combat personality involvement, in the interest of unbiased justice. A Marshal must at all times endeavour to stem violent, basic reactions, at least till evaluation of the circumstances offer decisive effectiveness and warranty.

"Whoops! There's a step there, didn't you know?"

Cresswell got off his knees, breathing hard. The other boy snickered.

"This way, Marshal. Mind that pole, oh! too late. You have to listen, Marshal." The other boy seemed vastly amused.

"Come on, Marshal," Clyde Prekosi said. "I'll look after you. This way. Come on."

Cresswell gritted his teeth. Cautiously he felt his way forward.

"What's the matter, Marshal? Scared? Don't you trust me? Come on. Hurry."

Three steps, four steps. At the fifth step nothing under his foot. He stopped, but two small hands thumped the small of

his back and threw him off balance. Threshing wildly, he plunged into space.

He landed in a trench half-filled with mud and slime. Gasping and choking, he fought for a footing in the slippery muck.

The children cheered uproariously. His efforts to scramble out up the greasy sides of the trench had them rolling on the ground, hopelessly convulsed.

"We can't let you go home like that, Mr. Cresswell. Can we, Nicki?"

"No," Nicki said happily. "He stinks."

More laughter. "You should see yourself, Mr. Cresswell. You do look funny."

Cresswell hunched and battled to keep his mind emotionally frozen in protective period stoicism.

The splashing sound of water gave him too short a warning and the jet hit his chest and knocked him off his feet. He tried to get up, but they hosed him down, following his retreat till they had him pinned against a wall. hilariously they half-drowned him.

It seemed an eternity before they turned the water off.

"Hey, Marshal, you don't stink no more!"

Coughing and spluttering, Cresswell slowly got on to his hands and knees. He rested his head on his arms and shivered as he tried to clear his lungs. The whip-ray jolt across his buttocks jerked him over with an agonized howl.

"Hey, I caught you bending, blind man," Clyde said gaily. "You're my first score for today."

Both boys thought this highly diverting.

The old, old pupa of fear tested its imprisoning cords and fed voraciously upon suppressed signals of distress.

"Whoa! Set her down," Galig said. "Hullo, Marshal. You look kinda damp."

Cresswell halted but did not reply.

"He's a Marshal, Sam. Came to look us over. He ain't seen nothing yet." A brief gruff laugh. "Marshal, I want you to

meet Sam Brent. Be friendly, Sam, give him a smile. That's it. Sam's in charge of our Mines Department. He's gonna be your new boss."

Cresswell kept his mouth shut.

"Ain't very talkative, is he?" Brent said.

Never in his life had Cresswell so accurately judged a man by his voice. He felt his guts go tight.

"Oh, well, he's had a tiring day playing with the kids," Galig said. "Poor guy must be exhausted. Nice to have somebody around who loves children."

Cresswell stood stolidly, refusing to be needled.

"Okay, Clyde, take him back, then go to the Long House and bring me Penona, huh?"

"Okay, Ben," Clyde said eagerly. "Come on, Marshal."

"Better bring Sam's along, too. Laurie again, Sam?"

Sam did not hurry to reply. "Yeah," he said. "Bring Laurie. And that red-haired one, too."

"Okay, Mr. Brent."

"Oh, Marshal," Galig called, "I moved your ship. Hope you don't mind? Figured you wouldn't be needing it any more, and it kinda clutters up the place . . ."

At Cresswell's request the occupants of the dormitory made sure that no eyes were present.

"They gave you a bad time," she said. It was a statement of fact not a question.

"That's not important," Cresswell said curtly. "I want information. First, we are not under guard, are we?"

"Well no. We are free to move about. But we can never be sure where they might be prowling, or spying on us. We cannot run away, can we? Where could we go?"

"Uhuh. Does everybody with eyes live in the Hotel?"

"Why, yes," she said. "Galig has his own suite and so does Brent, when he's in town. The boys have the ground floor and Dr. Hillop has a room there too, somewhere."

"Good. Who's this Dr. Hillop? What's he like?"

A fresh voice broke in. "He's old and an alcoholic. Poor old guy. Simple old-fashioned disease, but they won't cure

him. They like him that way. There's nothing he can do alone, so he's drunk most of the time."

"I see. A tame medicine man. Who works in the Hotel? Is there a regular janitor or porter?"

A rusty voice said, "Old Tim Hardy works downstairs. They have Colin Mahmoud to do all the dirty jobs. Then . . . then he has a maid or two . . ."

"Permanent maids?"

"Uh, more or less. They cook and . . ."

"And on a special night he gets more in from the Long House?"

The girl was surprised. "You know about the Long House?"

"Uh-huh. Never mind that now. Can you get in touch with Colin what's-his-name?"

The rusty voice said, "Mahmoud? I don't know. Why?"

Cresswell swore and licked his lips. "Why? To get us out of bondage, that's why. Don't you have a leader?"

"We had Godlin," a sad voice said. "Now they keep him in the cellar. He might not be alive any more, even."

"Godlin's alive," a firm female voice said. "He promised us. They still send food down."

"It might be a trick."

"Another one? No. We would suffer torment, he said, but we would triumph."

"Yes, but when?" a pessimistic voice asked. "How can we fight? What can we fight with? How can we win without bloodshed?"

Cresswell missed the significance of the last remark, and a weary voice said, "Oh, God, we've been over all this so many times. Help arrives and, like the Marshal here, is tricked to join our ranks. It has happened before. It will always happen. If Godlin is not already dead, then he'll die in that cellar."

"You have no faith."

"I have no hope. Godlin had courage and fire enough to spark warmth into our drab existence. Under the yoke without his heart we are miserable flesh indeed."

"Who is Godlin?" Cresswell said impatiently.

"He was our champion," a voice said quietly. "It is common on these far-flung places to find a self-made minister of a self-made creed. Godlin built the Hall of Humanity and there he preached of the brotherhood of man and spread the unconflicting truth taken from the Agnostics through to the Zoroasters."

"When the Night came upon most of us," another voice said, "he was one of the few not stricken. He denounced Galig in no uncertain terms and Galig threatened him with a gun and gave him some opak. And Godlin said, 'I drink this willingly to join my people, for if I have sight here, I am sharing with evil.'"

"That's what he said. They abused him, tormented him, and, because they couldn't beat him, they put him in the cellar."

"No matter what they did to him, he remained indomitable."

"And always, no matter what they did, he made us sorry for them and offered pity for their folly."

Cresswell formed a private opinion, but said, "He sounds like quite a man, but his tactics are too long-range for me. Now, I want to get a message to Mahmoud. Can it be done? And can he be trusted?"

"Ha, Col. About time. Put it on the table, boy," Galig said.

Colin Mahmoud carefully checked that the table had not been moved and put the bottle down. "Anything else, sir?" he asked.

"Not just now. You want anything, Sam? No. We'll ring when we want you. Oh, you might say hullo to your sister before you go. She was getting lonely for me, weren't you, sweetheart? So I brought her over."

Heartsick, Colin waited.

"Say hullo, I said," Galig insisted, pleasantness veiling menace. "After all, what you can't see you can't be ashamed of, eh?" He paused. "And you don't want me to

make you do what I made you do before, hey?" he said slyly.

Colin trembled. "Hullo, Penona," he blurted.

In a small voice she replied, "Hullo, Colin."

Galig slapped his thigh and roared. "Beautiful! Beautiful! Ha-ha! Romeo and Juliet. Don't go too far away, boy, I might need you yet. Godammit, Sam, I don't know where you get the energy from . . ."

Colin managed to slip from the room.

It was a small foil-sealed pill from the collar of the Marshal's shirt, one of a full set of six mobbops. Assured that it was not lethal, rusty voice took it. He habitually went every night to talk with his mother in the second dormitory. He gave it to Elgert Fynod in the second Dormitory, a piano-player who was called to the Hotel two or three times a week. Elgert passed it to Maria, his cousin, a cook at the Hotel. She gave it to Colin Mahmoud with a simple message, "The Marshal says put this in the fresh water tank."

Colin Mahmoud was clammy with sweat. He crept up the stairs and tiptoed along the passage leading to the attic.

"Where are you going, Col?" the boy asked.

Colin spun and flattened himself against the wall, completely taken by surprise. "I . . . I . . . I thought I heard a window banging."

There was a pause where Colin heard only the thumping of his heart.

"I don't hear a window banging," the boy said. "What have you got in your hand?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Yes you have," the boy said. "Come on, let me see."

Colin stared, sightless, wordless.

"Hand it over or I'll jolt you," the boy said.

Colin slapped his hand to his mouth, bit and swallowed. The boy cried, "Hey!" and angrily pulled the trigger . . .

"This is your doing, Marshal," Galig said ominously. "I don't know what you put poor Col up to, but as soon as we can get the Doc sober enough to perform an autopsy we'll find out." Galig surveyed the frightened faces in the dormitory. He lifted his voice. "You people know one thing. Around here you do as you're told, got that? Anybody tries to kick, they'll get their legs broken! Understand?" he shouted.

Cresswell kept his mouth closed and his face dead.

"We'll tame you, Marshal," Galig rasped. "We'll tame you!"

A Marshal must not expend his energies abortively. He must wait, if necessary, and command his patience till an opportune moment occurs for him to redress a disadvantageous balance.

"You did such a great job with the kids yesterday that they want you to play with them again today," Galig said facetiously. "They say you're a lot of fun, but then, a new one always is..."

It seemed to be a pit, and the sound of the children's voices came from overhead. The top of the wall was beyond his questing fingers. He had had to strip. No choice. The threat of another beating. But why this pit?

"Hey, look behind you, blind man!"

Cresswell turned. There was something there, something that was approaching him almost soundlessly. He backed away, trapped into a corner. The children chortled. Something twined adroitly round his ankle, a furry sinew and a tiny hand. He moved sideways and kicked, but another hairy tendril closed effortlessly around his thigh. He grasped the thing to tear it away but it was like tough furry gristle and others like it curled round his arms and he lurched and the thing was on him.

Cresswell screamed and the children clapped delightedly. The wicked curved beak of an octopus flashed into

Cresswell's mind, but this thing was all mouth, wet and drooling.

Cresswell struggled desperately to free himself from the creature but it hugged him with revolting tenacity, slobbering over him with what felt like two huge lips moving over his skin, sucking. He staggered and fell, tried to punch and failed, rolled on top of it. It skilfully squirmed on to his back.

Cresswell shuddered with repulsion. He clambered to his feet with the thing clinging to him. He groped for a wall, smashed his back against it. The creature slid under his arm. He punched, kicked, rolled, but the pulpy thing would not let go. Frantically he pushed, pulled, tried to loosen the grip, but the thing clutched lovingly, fluidly moving, sucking, sucking, sucking.

The children urged and jeered and laughed till ineffectual wrestling had sapped his strength and he collapsed from sheer fatigue. Back in a corner Cresswell gulped air and quivered. And, like a nauseating, sickening jellyfish, the thing oozed over his chest to his lap.

A tiny bell rang a signal and the creature responded and reluctantly relinquished him. Cresswell felt the rubbery tendons relax and draw away and he sobbed with relief like a baby.

"Hey, look, the Marshal's crying."

"The Marshal's a sissy."

"He's a fraidy."

"Scared of a little old salt-licker."

"If you hadn't of sweat, blind man, he wouldn't of touched you."

"Ha, ha, ha."

"Wait till we show you our next ones."

"They bite, Marshal."

The worm in its cocoon swelled larger, bulging, obtruding on the consciousness with its threat, a primeval element straining at bonds of intelligence, self-control and will-power.

A final indignity. A harness on his head and shafts in his hands.

Cresswell's body ached with weariness. One thought alone salvaged his hope. He thanked God that he still had his uniform.

"On your marks. Get set. Go!"

A low whip-ray jolt needled into Cresswell. "Get going, blind man! Pick 'em up! Faster! They're gaining on you..."

"Why don't you face facts, Marshal? You'll never beat Galig. No blind man can ever beat Galig."

"If we work together..."

"No," another voice said. "Des is right. Trying to put Galig down only makes it bad for the rest of us. Galig took us out today himself and he gave us hell."

"But you have to fight! He's walking all over you. You just can't sit back and do nothing."

"We've been doing it and we've been getting by. We don't give him trouble and he doesn't mess us about too much."

"Godlin said that the day will come when..."

"Damn Godlin!" Cresswell said hotly. "We must act! We must make an effort!"

"We know how you feel, Marshal," rusty voice said. "We've all been through what you've been through, or something like it. Okay, so you tried something and it didn't come off. Colin's dead and we've had it taken out of our hides."

"Yeah. Things are not good, but they can be worse."

"It's too risky, Marshal. For a blind man it's just too risky."

"Good God! Do you want to stay blind forever?"

"We've been blind a long time now, Marshal. Maybe we are used to it. Godlin said that there was purity in blindness..."

"Damn Godlin! Damn him! I want to see! I want to see again!"

There was silence after Cresswell's almost hysterical plea.

A voice said gruffly, "You'll get used to it, too, Marshal. After a while . . ."

Darkness. Where was everything? What was anything? Who was behind? Who walked in front? What is that noise? Is it really only a twig tapping the glass? Is he smiling? Is he scowling? Is he telling the truth? What does it look like? And what does what it looks like look like? How to tell? Why the reality of fantasy to be denied? Where was everything, the creepies, the crawlies, the evils, the awfuls?

There was nakedness in darkness and the soul was defenceless.

"Seeing that you killed Col, I don't see why you shouldn't do his work," Galig said. "And I want to keep a personal eye on you. You're a bad influence on my subjects."

Cresswell forbore to reply and Galig sneered. "Strong, silent type, ain't you?"

Cresswell stared mutely into darkness.

"Heard the kids had you blubbering this morning," Galig jibed. "Reckon their pets took a liking to you. Ah, you can blush if you can't talk."

"I thought I was going to work in the mines."

"What? Oh, I changed my mind." He paused. "If you behave yourself you can keep the job here. If not, Sam can have what's left of you next time he comes to town."

Cresswell masterfully concealed his grim pleasure.

"Here is the ice-bucket," Maria said. "He'll open the bottle himself."

Cresswell picked up the tray. This would make his ninth trip to Galig's suite. He listened carefully. Yes, again he was being followed, watched over. He hoped it was Clyde.

Out of the kitchen, along a passage, turn, up fifteen steps, twenty paces, and there, on the left, the ever open doorway to the apartment of the ruler.

Cresswell felt with his hand, the tray tilted, the ice-bucket careened and fell to the floor with a crash.

"What the devil . . .?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Cresswell said, mortified.

"Well don't just stand there! Mop it up!"

"Yes, of course," Cresswell said contritely. He got on to his knees and began to fumble for the ice-bucket.

He heard Galig approach, grumbling. "Lucky for you the bottle didn't break."

Cresswell found the ice-bucket and began to mop with his handkerchief. He heard Galig pick up the bottle.

"God, you're spreading it all over the floor, you clumsy crud," Galig said. "Go down and get a proper mop." He turned away and his steps moved back to his table. "And bring up some more ice."

"Yes, sir," Cresswell said. He picked up the ice-bucket, groped for the door-knob and pulled the door shut.

"Don't close the door, you fool!"

Cresswell ignored the order. He emptied the ice-bucket, whipped his belt from his trousers, pulled an alloy loop from the belt-buckle and hooked it on the metal door-knob. With unhurried efficiency he pinned the other end of his belt to the wet floor. Five seconds.

Footsteps were already approaching the other side of the door as the boy Clyde got over his amazement and cried, "What are you doing?"

Cresswell clicked the buckle-switch, turned and sprang at the voice with the speed of a tiger.

Clyde squealed and broke, but Cresswell's hand found his waist-band and he wrenched the boy into his arms.

"Ben! He's got me! Ben! Ben!"

Cresswell swung his back against the wall, one arm pinioning the boy to his chest, his free hand finding the whip-ray holster.

From the other side of the door Galig gave a short, agonized scream.

The floor shook as he fell.

"Ben!"

Cresswell shifted his hold to grip the boy by the scruff. He shook him till his teeth rattled. "Shut up, you little bastard, or I'll break your neck," he snarled.

He carried him to the door and knelt on him while he recovered his shock-belt. "You're going to be my eyes," Cresswell grated. "Any other kids or Brent come around, you tell me, hear? Or I'll choke the life out of you."

Clyde was too terrified to answer.

Cresswell gripped his throat again and kicked open the door. "I want Galig's head. Lead me to it."

"Ben, Ben!" the shattered boy moaned.

"Shut up! His head! Where's his head?"

The boy was frozen with shock.

Cresswell swore. He found the body with his foot, felt with his gun hand, found Galig's chin. He thumbed the whip-ray charge to maximum, pressed the muzzle against Galig's temple and pulled the trigger.

"That makes sure of him," Cresswell panted.

Clyde began to wail.

Stuffing the whip-ray into his belt, Cresswell savagely pulled him round. With a fistful of shirt-front, he accurately slapped hard, once, twice, three times. "Now listen, you little swine, you've got a new boss, and you don't give him warning, you get hurt, understand?"

The boy choked for breath, frightened out of his wits.

Cresswell set him roughly back on the floor. "Now take me to Doctor Hillop . . ."

"Are you sure Galig is dead?" Dr. Hillop said disbelievingly.

"You can see for yourself later." Cresswell was terse. "Right now I want to get the rest of the kids under control."

"They don't take any notice of me," the Doctor said sadly. "They call me Duck Hiccup, the drunken quack." He paused. "They're right, of course."

"I don't give a damn about that. You seem sober enough now and I need your support."

"Yes." The Doctor heaved a sigh. "There's an autopsy to do, isn't there? Mustn't drink till I've done the autopsy."

"Get a grip on yourself, man!" Cresswell raged. "There'll be no autopsy! Galig's dead! Now shake it up, for God's sake, and come along with me . . ."

"Are all the kids here?"

"Y . . . Y . . . Yes, Mr. Cresswell."

Cresswell bared his teeth. "Good," he said softly. His back against a wall, he held Clyde in a fearsome steel embrace. "Now, Clyde, you're the head boy. See that they do as they're told. I want all weapons piled on the floor, including knives, right?"

Cresswell squeezed and Clyde shrieked, "Do as he says! Do as he says!"

The leaderless children, alarmed by the dramatic change in events, exchanged scared glances. They began to unburden.

Cresswell heard the clatter on the floor with satisfaction. "Okay, Doc, line them up and search them." Enjoying giving psychological impetus to his orders, Cresswell squeezed again and Clyde howled.

Shortly the Doctor reported that the children were completely unarmed. He sounded distressed. "Is it really necessary to hurt that boy?"

"I'd like to break every bone in his goddam body," Cresswell said with feeling. "Don't get sentimental about this tyke, Doc." His fingers dug like a claw. "Now, there's a cellar round here somewhere, where a man named Godlin is kept, right?"

"That's so," the Doctor said. "Not a nice place. Damp. He shouldn't be kept there. I told Mr. Galig . . ."

"Okay, okay," Cresswell said impatiently. "We'll go and let him out. Lead the way, Doc, and you kids follow him. And we, Clyde, my beauty, will bring up the rear, won't we? Just to make sure that they behave like good little boys . . ."

The insidious slug was settled on the borders of consciousness, restive, frustrated, chaffing at its bindings, turning and searching for more food and more food.

"You are a violent man, Marshal," Godlin reproved.

Cresswell dropped the cellar key into his pocket. "There are times when violence is justified," he said fiercely, "and times when violence is very satisfying."

"There was no need to literally hurl that boy down the stairs."

"If he's hurt, the Doc's with him, isn't he? What are you bitching for? You're free now, aren't you?" Cresswell testily replied.

"Yes. I suppose I should thank you for that," Godlin conceded mildly. "I only regret the force that you have seen fit to employ. I abhor violence . . ."

"Oh, yes, yes. You'd sit on your fanny from now to Kingdom Come. Did you expect to win Galig over with brotherly love?"

"Galig was an unfortunate person. He could not help being what he was. He was cursed with sight. It was we that had no eyes, but he that was blind . . ."

"Well, I don't give a blown booster for your philosophizing," Cresswell said crossly. "My job is to ensure and stabilize equitable local justice. That is what I am doing and will do by whatever means are in my power."

"Marshal, Marshal, there is hate in your voice, and hate and justice are incompatible. You are blind, don't you understand? It is those with eyes who are damned."

Cresswell snorted. "And how do you propose to deal with Mr. Brent? Preach him a sermon?"

Godlin said, "It would be best if he could be persuaded to become one of us . . ."

Cresswell gave a short, hard laugh. "You mean hold him down and ram a bottle of opak between his teeth?" he said scornfully.

To his surprise, Godlin replied quite seriously, "That

would be a most beneficial solution, both for him and for us . . .”

The cocoon was fat now, ripening, and the dark thing within was feeling the urge to break out. Biding its time, it gathered its strength and felt the fibres of its prison weaken further.

“Where is he now, Doctor?”

“He’s still in the middle of the street.”

“Are you sure he’s unarmed?”

“Except for his whip, yes,” the Doctor said fussily. “You don’t seem to appreciate, Marshal, that he knows how to use that thing.”

“Yes,” Cresswell said bitterly, “I can imagine. How close is he to the foundation post?”

“Not close enough yet. About twenty metres.”

Brent cracked his whip and Cresswell heard him calling. “Come on out, Marshal. Where’s you hiding?”

Sweat trickled into Cresswell’s mouth. He shivered. Yes, Brent would like the personal extension contact made by an old-style whip.

“Is he still moving?”

“Yes.” The Doctor sounded unhappy. “Marshal, he’s a very mean man.”

“That’s news?” Cresswell said acidly. “How close to the post?”

“About ten metres. Marshal, don’t you think Godlin’s idea . . .”

“No!” he said harshly. “If they surrounded Brent he’d murder them. Has he stopped?”

“No. He’s going slow. Godlin thinks . . .”

“I won’t kill him if I can help it,” Cresswell said. He tasted bile. “Where is he now?”

“Almost there. I . . .”

“That’ll do.” Cresswell licked his lips. His hands shook as he closed the circuit.

Twelve ray-guns, six on each side, sent a cross-fire of jolts across the street.

"He's down, Marshal," the Doctor said in surprise. "He's gone down."

"Hit?"

"It looks like it. He seems . . ."

Cresswell parted the wiring, picked up a gun and pounded down the stairs. "Come on, Doc," he shouted. "Bring the rope."

Cresswell burst on to the street and halted for a moment. He got his breathing in hand and his direction aligned. He heard the Doctor behind him.

With a firm tread he marched towards the foundation stone, the Doctor trotting at his heels.

"Left a little, Marshal," the Doctor said, and then things began to happen fast. A swift scrabble and a bark of laughter. "He's up, Marshal, look out!" and almost instantaneously the tip of the whip cutting Cresswell's knuckles and snatching the whip-ray from his hand.

"Clever boy, hey, Marshal?" The whip sang and Cresswell cowered, and the lash bit into his forearms.

The whip cracked and Brent growled, "You hear that, Marshal? You're going to jump to that before I'm through."

Cresswell flinched. Who was this man? What did he look like? How big was he? How strong was he?

The thong cut Cresswell's thigh, licked his shoulders, curled over his back. With a reflex speed born of training and torment, Cresswell snatched at the coil, got a grip and heaved.

The startled Brent was jerked forward as the butt was torn from his hands. "What the . . .? You're full of tricks, ain't you, Marshal?"

Cresswell hunched, listening to the voice, trying vainly to locate the body precisely. His back prickled.

"So, blind man, you want a stand up fight, do you?" Brent called. "That's all right by me."

The blow caught Cresswell high on the cheek and knocked him sideways on to his knees. He lurched up on

one foot and a fist crashed into his right eye and put him flat on his back. Dazed, he half-rolled and registered the crunch of two quick steps, lightning guessed, threw his arms wide and lunged.

He caught Brent at the knees, hung on, and Brent fruitlessly tried to free himself and toppled. Blind rage, blind temper, blind murder consumed Cresswell. He grabbed Brent's belt and hauled himself in one sweep on to that man's chest.

Brent tried to squirm but Cresswell brought his knee up viciously, once, twice. Brent bellowed and Cresswell found his jaw and brought the edge of his hand smashing brutally into Brent's throat.

Brent writhed and arched, gurgling and fighting for air. Cresswell's hands sought Brent's face, held his head down. Remorselessly Cresswell's cruel thumbs stabbed.

The larva was near to maturity. Cresswell was very conscious of it. It was on the surface of his mind, an unwanted, challenging presence, dark and forbidding. Cresswell recognized it and fought desperately to contain it, even as he trembled. Was not the road now clear to drive it back with hope?

The Hall of Humanity was crowded. Godlin rapped the table with his stick and the lively hum of chatter ebbed and died. A worn Cresswell noted the power of this man as the silence stretched unbroken in expectation for his words.

"My friends," Godlin said, his voice marked with suffering, yet strong and firm. "My friends, for years we have been on trial. We have trod a dark road, have been brought low, have been put to the test. To what purpose? Are we to believe that what we have gone through is merely an event to be forgotten as soon as possible? After carrying a burden for years, are we to cast it by the wayside in ignorance of its value? Has our suffering been an unfortunate, an unhappy whim of fate that we were unlucky to encounter? I think not.

"No, my friends," he said, his voice taking on power, depth and meaning, "we share a common disability. There have been blind communities before, but never one such as this, never one such as now is offered us. We are all without sight. Do you not recognize the unity here? Commonly afflicted, we have a unique equality that only sight can destroy.

"We have been abused by sighted persons, persecuted by sighted persons, whipped by sighted persons. What, then, has been the curse upon Albamarle? Who were our tormentors, who jeered at us, who mocked us, subjected us to unspeakable treatment and torture, both mental and physical?

"It was the Sighted Ones! Only with eyes did they have power! Only with eyes could they take pleasure in the writhings of our blind nakedness! Can you not see, then," he cried passionately, "you who have suffered? Wherein does evil dwell?

"We who are blind, do we not depend upon each other? Is there not a common bond between us, of sympathy and understanding? Are we in a position to exploit each other, to ill-treat each other?

"Contentment is within our grasp can we but find it. We have an opportunity here to develop a community wonderfully superior to anything in the Universe. We are blind. Let not this physical blindness extend to our brains. Here on Albamarle, by a freak chance, we have the blessing of blindness.

"Yes! Blessing! I say to you that our blindness is a gift! We are all blind, all of us. Every one of us. For the first time in history there is a group of blind people free from the interference of Sighted Ones! For the first time the advantages can be demonstrated."

Cresswell was aghast. "Wait a minute," he interjected. "Blindness is not incurable. Get a medic-team in from a Front-post and in a week . . ."

"No!" Godlin thundered. "Can you not comprehend? Eyes are the windows of evil! Eyes are the accoutrements

of the Devil! Eyes are for prompting lust and acquisition!"

Cresswell was stunned. "But you *need* eyes," he protested. "You can't do anything. What about manufacturing? Technological products? What about medicine? What about delicate surgery, diagnoses, drug selection and treatment? What about reading and writing?"

"We are all together as one. A common affliction ceases to be an affliction. The population has unity and, in its unity, has strength. There is no problem that we cannot overcome. We can tend our rich land and produce. Our pleasures will come as our tactile senses develop. The shadings of sound will become our art. We shall delight in our sense of smell and our sense of taste will become one of infinite gradings.

"These four senses are enough! Neglected by the sighted, blindness alone accentuates them to full recognition, to the limit of their exquisite capacity. Blindness is far from being a handicap! The full realization of our other senses alone is sufficient compensation!"

A pulse hammered on Cresswell's temple. "You cannot want to remain blind," he persisted. "It's . . . it's not natural . . ."

"Not natural?" Cresswell sensed the smile in the tone.

"Civilization has bred us, and an absence of eyes is unthinkable. Yet here we have experienced eyes, and what eyes mean to the human race," Godlin said softly. "The discovery of superiority, the domination, the aggression, the cruelty, the insularity, the pride.

"No." His voice rose. "No! Let us see with our minds the wisdom of accepting this challenge. Let us remain sightless. It has been a trial placed upon us by God, in an endeavour to show us His meaning.

"By depriving us of sight, He has given us a gift and opened a new world to our awareness, a world of mutuality and love, where eyes do not see and covet, where eyes do not peek and pry, where eyes do not focus upon a target called an enemy, where eyes do not feed televised opiates

into glutton brains, where eyes do not distract the mind from the thinking processes."

The words rang in the hall, and the hall was a void, and Cresswell was alone.

"Blindness! Blindness is the balm of God, removing much of the temptation to sin beyond our power. How can we have greed for the yellow of gold, the sparkle of diamonds, the flashing of rubies? What need have we to squabble over more land than we need, when the ownership of vast tracts is beyond a blind man's imaginings? How can the blind know the self-gratifying power implicit to a man overlooking territory under his dominion?"

Cresswell loosened his shirt. He felt hot. There was an unreal quality in the words that fell on his ears.

"Eyes are the bolster to preening vanity, the pain of poverty and ugliness. It is sighted men who fight each other, who have grandiose visions of glory that rely almost entirely upon the visual trappings of success; a fine house, and fine clothes, and jewelled adornments, and large property, and an unsullied panoramic view. Demonstrable area and space are concomitant with personal aggrandizement.

"A blind man has no such visions. His world is where he is, and he is only affected by his surroundings so much as they register upon his remaining senses."

"It is wrong," Cresswell said, shaking his head helplessly. "I . . . I don't know how, but . . . but, please." The sounds of the unknown dark thrummed in his ears. "You can't . . . There's your own children. You cannot deprive them . . ."

"It is God's will. We have been shown the way. Our path leads us to a purer fraternity, a true brotherhood of humanity. The visible finery that maintains class distinction ceases to have value and we have instead an equality of merit. There is no colour problem and, in a generation, the language blend will deny any possibility of racialism.

"And our religion," he lifted his voice, "our religion is that we have been chosen by God to be physically blind that we might lead humanity by example to greater humility, to greater understanding and love.

"We must accept blindness as a necessary curb on our overweening human vanity. And the six of our children, taken from us, selected to be trained as seeing watchdogs, to be brutalized, to become our overseers, to employ their sight to ensure our subjugation, these children must be returned to their parents, must be given opak that they do not grow with the blind narrowness of sight, that they might know love and true fellowship and be as one and not apart . . ."

Around him the crowd started to cheer and Cresswell gaped. "Wait!" he cried. "You can't mean that. You must want to see!"

"No," Godlin said. "We are decided. The land we till is rich, the bountiful. Without eyes life can be good."

"But . . . but what about me? My ship. You must find my ship. I want to see again. I want my eyes! I want my eyes!"

"Marshal," Godlin said quietly, "this is Albamarle. All the people here are blind."

"So what? On my ship's radio I could call for help. I must!"

"No, Marshal." There was chilling iron in Godlin's kindly tone. "We will have peace. When outsiders call they will learn that blindness is caused rapidly by something in the atmosphere. This should dissuade visitors from staying too long and also be a bulwark against objectionable occupancy by acquisitive Sighted Ones."

Cresswell's head was spinning. "But . . . I want to see. I must see! I have a job to do. I need my eyes!"

"Marshal, can you not understand. You have experienced the inhumanity of Sighted Ones. Can you not envisage our brotherhood of humility? It is a precious thing, Marshal. We cannot allow you to make a report and jeopardize the promise of our new existence. We must protect ourselves."

The cocoon started to fracture.

Dismayed, Cresswell said, "I won't say anything. I'll substantiate your story. I won't tell anybody at all! With one of the children acting for me, I could get back."

"You would gain eyes, and eyes are the initiators of corruption. With you here our secret is safe, our security unchallenged. No, Marshal. For your own good you must stay here."

The Thing emerged from its chrysalis, its metamorphosis complete. A tar-black moth, eyeless velvet, crouched and ready.

In panic Cresswell pleaded, "But I don't want to be blind! Can't you get it through your heads? I must see! I must!"

"We on Albamarle have renounced sight," Godlin intoned implacably. "With the love of the blind for the blind we shall prosper and grow. We shall not be plagued by wars and greed. We shall develop a culture . . ."

"No!" Cresswell cried, his resources drained. "No! Help me!"

He felt his tenuous hold upon substantial rock being relentlessly severed. He stared about him. Who was that? What was that? How many? What were they? Shuffle, scuffle, wheeze, creak, squeak, bump, slither, hiss, all around him, all the time. The thin thread of hope parted and the abyss yawned and his hands were empty. Rustle, tap, hush, whisper, scrape, tickle, near, far, spider, demon . . .

"I must see! I must SEE!"

With finality Godlin said, "Marshal, you are one of us."

With irresistible power the black moth opened its huge jet wings to envelop and consume the twin convolutions of the cerebrum, closing off the light in the mind.

Cresswell sank to his knees. "No. Oh, God, no." It was a sob of despair. "Mother! Mother! It's gone out. It's gone out." Tears coursed down his cheeks and there were none to take pity on a picture of anguish.

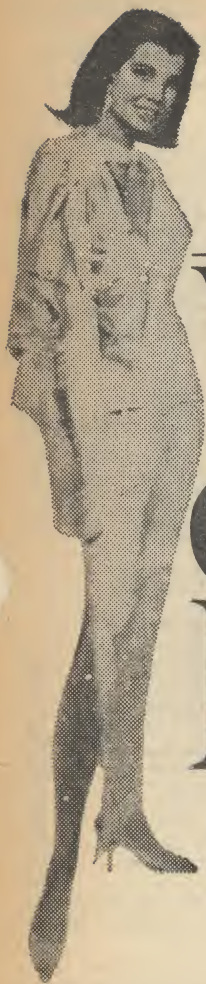
"Mother! I CAN'T SEE! I CAN'T SEE!"

He shrank back, his face working. Ears turned curious blind faces to follow his incomprehensible agitation.

Godlin coughed. "The Marshal is tired. While we may not entirely approve of his methods, we can appreciate that he has been under considerable self-imposed stress. It would be charitable to remember that he is not yet familiar with the friendly cloak of night. We shall care for him and teach him, for he is one of our number. God has chosen that we be together. We all have been chosen, that we might know that the loss of sight is no sacrifice, that we gain a hundred-fold in pure humanity."

The settlers voiced their acclamation and, in a corner, Marshal Vincent Cresswell pulled his shirt over his head and rocked and wept and whimpered.

THE END



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